

Nurturing Cognitive and Affective Empathy: The Benefits of Perspective-Taking

Written by Jan Lüdert and Katriona Stewart

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Last summer we taught a two-week course titled “Politics, Economics and Diplomacy in a Global Context” as part of the University of British Columbia’s Future Global Leaders pre-university program. Our class comprised of 33 15-18 year-olds from multiple countries, including Canada, China, Colombia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Japan, Singapore and Mexico.

Because our classroom was so diverse, we approached events from a range of viewpoints. To help students synthesize lecture material, we designed a series of perspective-taking activities based around real world events. Approaching events from different vantage points is an effective way of exploring the complex mechanics of an individual case: students gain a more meaningful understanding of the course content, and are equipped with conceptual and practical tools that they can use to solve complex, interdependent problems in small team settings.

Aside from deepening cognitive learning, perspective-taking also helps develop students’ affective empathy. It was moving to see how invested the groups became in their chosen global advocacy campaign. For example, after presenting on mental health challenges in the developing world, one group member made an emotive plight for increasing awareness, disclosing how she had been affected by a family’s member’s depression.

Each day, our course was structured around a 90 minute lecture followed by 90 minutes of small group work. In their groups, the students would deliberate, research and present on self-selected case studies. The chosen cases were:

- “Security Threats: Perceptions and Priorities in Different World Regions”
- “Grasping Grand Challenges in Global Health Governance”
- “Re-thinking the Refugee Crisis”
- “Batty for Bananas: An Introduction to Trade Disputes”
- “Fending off Financial Crises”
- “Negotiating Nuclear Arms”
- “Create-A-Campaign”

The apex of the course was the “Create-A-Campaign” case study. Groups had two days (plus some homework time) to design and present a global advocacy campaign on an issue of their choosing.

First, we spent a portion of the lecture component analyzing the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Students were then asked to reflect on the strategies that helped this campaign succeed, and to identify features of this campaign that could be extended to other topics, for example, cluster munitions. We helped students to appreciate the communicative power of agenda-setting and framing, as well as the basics of persuasion mechanisms, especially with respect to processes of normative grafting. We offered students tools such as the use of powerful, evoking images and social shaming, and we stressed the importance of collecting data and using evidence to persuade gatekeepers, as well as outlining strategies such as building alliances with influential groups and individuals – from celebrities to career diplomats.

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Once we approved the groups' campaign topics, we asked students to research their chosen issue and identify relevant stakeholders and effective campaign techniques. Groups were tasked to come up with a detailed campaign design including a slogan, logo, objective, and a targeted strategic plan.

The following day each group gave a ten-minute powerpoint campaign presentation, followed by a question and answer session from the floor. We were overwhelmed by the creativity and detail that went into the presentations. Students presented campaign strategies on topics ranging from banning cluster munitions, destigmatizing mental health as a global governance issue, and supporting Syrian refugees.

Taking Stock: Insights from Student Evaluations and Instructors' Reflections:

To sum up, and taking both student evaluations and instructors' reflections into account, this final section offers suggestions and recommendations for developing a similar course.

First of all, it is clear that students particularly enjoyed the group work, case studies and campaign presentations. By creating a collaborative space, students could apply their newly gained knowledge while offering instructors a means to assess their learning and to advance learning strategies for the future. As a result, the students became curious and motivated, partly because they had a strong sense of shared ownership in the course. Student evaluations highlighted that the case studies forced them to do wide-ranging and in-depth research in a short amount of time in order to 'deconstruct' prior to creatively 'reconstructing' optimal frameworks and guidelines for action on global issues. Group work also helped foster intercultural relationships.

However, it is here that we as instructors sometimes had to help students empathize with one another and manage their individual learning expectations. What is more, and in line with insights on active learning research, class content was deepened through a combination of classic instructor-to-student content transfer and large class discussion as well as applied small group student-to-student learning and applied problem solving.

The course gave students a sense of the transition from high school to university. In particular, they acquired a strong experience of success at an undergraduate level that depends on self-initiative, the need to think critically, and a willingness to collaborate and learn with peers. Course evaluations also underscored how the course had helped students to narrow or reaffirm their intended degree aspirations. For instance, some students chose this course thinking they wanted to study economics, but ended up being more interested in politics and diplomacy. Conversely, for others, the course affirmed their pre-existing study intentions, clarified disciplinary differences and equipped them with appreciation of what their university experience could be like.

Lastly, our goal was to bring passion to the classroom and to empower students to take charge of their intellectual growth. We wanted students to realize that university learning is not only a cognitive process of mastering content, but is also an interactive space to ponder ethical questions and to release the empathy required to become truly global citizens.

We felt we built a strong rapport with students, with one student remarking,

Jan and Kate kept telling us we could change society. It became our incentive, our motivation of moving forward. Now I think I can change the world by studying politics, economics and diplomacy.

Feedback such as this is of course encouraging, yet is also a reminder that course intention and design – whether in person or virtual – must balance habits of mind (cognitive learning) with habits of heart (affective learning), while also incorporating habits of hand (psychomotor learning) through perspective-taking and engaging class activities.

This post is number three of three related pieces on [Innovating a Mixed-Mode Course in a Multicultural Classroom](#). [Click here for installment number one](#), and [here for installment number two](#).

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