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Teaching Political Science in Pakistan: Effective Tutorial Strategies

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ABSTRACT

In nearly all universities of Pakistan, public universities in particular, the teacher-centric approach is typically the norm. This longstanding practice is largely incompatible with the recent intellectual paradigm shifts and academic demands of the modern world. With the advent of the post-modern movement at the turn of the 20th century, questions were raised about the rigidity of the preceding movements and the learning methods they endorsed. Turning the conventional wisdom on its head and backing relativity and subjectivity, post-modernism was fiercely critical of the rigid teacher-centered learning approach in particular. Instead, it fervently made a case for student-centered mode of learning. While the approach has proven to be extremely popular and is increasingly becoming the dominant mode of learning throughout the developed world, it is yet to be implemented in developing and underdeveloped countries like Pakistan that still largely adhere to the teacher-centered mode of learning. This article proposes a model for running student-centered tutorials that will be instructive for any prospective future transition to student-centered mode of learning in Pakistan. Additionally, tutors and instructors in the discipline of political science and IR in particular will hopefully find the model useful and thought provoking.

Keywords: **Student-centered Learning, Teacher-Centered Learning, Post-Modernism, Model Tutorial.**

Introduction

In Pakistan, learning in universities is mostly teacher-centric as opposed to the student-centric style of teaching in the universities of the developed countries. The idea of a 'tutorial' in particular, where students actively discuss key issues amongst themselves in the presence of a tutor or a moderator, is more of an alien concept in Pakistan. The students, as a rule, are expected to stay quiet and attentive, while the Professor/Instructor does all the talking and occasionally entertains a couple of questions from a few eager and confident students at the end of each class. Group discussions and student-centered seminars are extremely uncommon in all Pakistani universities. Students simply are expected to attentively listen to lectures and make notes accordingly.

The following article is an attempt to structuralize tutorials (the backbone of student-centric learning) in the discipline of Political Science and International Relations. It proposes a unique model of running IR and political science tutorials more effectively and efficiently. The proposed model has special relevance for Pakistani Universities, where teacher-centric style is still the dominant mode of learning. In Pakistan, even the notion of a tutorial is somewhat foreign and novel, especially in the public university sector. Hence, introducing the tutorial mode of learning can be fairly challenging. This article can substantially help in overcoming this foreseeable predicament. On the one hand, it can be highly instructive on how to successfully run a tutorial in general. On the other hand, its focus on IR and political science can provide context specific disciplinary guidelines.

The recommended student-centric tutorial model in this paper is essentially a product of my own experiences and thought experiments. Having tutored at St Andrews University for over four years and with nearly eight years of teaching experience at University of the Punjab, my tutoring methodology has significantly evolved over the years. I have attempted to incorporate all that experience into a simple and straightforward model that can hopefully help us in successfully implementing a student-centric tutorial style system of learning in Pakistani universities. It will particularly be helpful for the discipline of IR and political science specifically and social sciences generally.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Over the years, I have maintained a reflective log to monitor and record the progress and shortcomings of my classes and tutorials. This reflective log allowed me to keep track of my own progress and that of my students. It also allowed me to reflect back on any drawbacks and failings during my classes. Most importantly, the log enabled me to reassess my teaching strategies and evolve according to the dictates and demands of both my discipline and students. Highlights from the reflective log were compared with the literary works in the field and a new strategy was subsequently adopted in the following classes. The reflective log proved to be an extremely useful tool and played an instrumental role in creating the student-centered tutorial model proposed in this paper.

The article takes its theoretical cue principally from the post-modern school of thought. This is because student-centric learning, as will become evident over the course of this discussion, is essentially a product of the recent post-modern movement (See e.g. Misdi et al., 2013). In order to fully understand the theoretical predisposition of this paper, it is necessary to first look at some of most outstanding limitations and handicaps of the teacher-centric approach.

To begin with, the longstanding teacher-centric approach is effectively rooted in the pre-modern and modern traditions that otherwise simply fail to account for the post-modern paradigm shift. Failure to cater to the dictates of the post-modern intellectual movement of the late 20th century not only prevents the students from

actively participating and contributing in various contemporaneous academic debates and discussions, but effectively also bars them from acquiring an indispensible skill set (Boboc, 2012).

In nearly all universities of Pakistan, public universities in particular, the teacher-centric approach is typically the norm. While this longstanding practice offers some clear benefits, it is largely incompatible with the recent intellectual shifts and academic demands of the modern world. The teacher-centric approach essentially focuses on the teacher or the instructor, while the students play only a secondary role.

In the teacher-centric approach, the teacher is seen as the medium through which impartial, unobjectionable and unquestionable objective knowledge is communicated to the recipients. Although questions from students are occasionally encouraged, they by and large cannot challenge both the source of knowledge or its supposedly objective claims (Wismath, 2013). This is primarily because the teacher-centric approach originates from the pre-modern and modernist intellectual traditions that were both fairly rigid in their respective pursuit of knowledge. Where the pre-modern movement did not permit any deviation from customs and norms, the modernist movement disregarded any pursuit of knowledge that was not compatible with empiricism and sensory experience. Both traditions thus demanded a firm instructor at the helm of learning, who would not only teach within the strict confines of the predetermined parameters but also firmly admonish any digression.

With the advent of the post-modern movement at the turn of the 20th century, questions were raised about the rigidity of the preceding movements. Consequently, the modes of learning that principally catered to the demands and dictates of the previous intellectual movements were also heavily scrutinized. Foremost among those modes of learning was the teacher-centric approach. Turning the conventional wisdom on its head, the post-modern movement questioned the relentless pursuit of objectivity by the preceding movements and highlighted the subjective realities of the social world (O'Donnell, 2003). Backing relativity and subjectivity, post-modernism was profoundly critical of the rigid teacher-centered mode of learning and its alleged claim to objectivity. This intellectual challenge subsequently paved way for a student-centered mode of learning that better accounted for subjective truths and realities.

Of somewhat recent vintage, the student-centric style of learning is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, the approach has proven to be extremely popular and is increasingly becoming the dominant mode of learning throughout the developed world (Hynes, 2018). This incredible success of the student-centric approach however is yet to be replicated in the developing and the underdeveloped world that still largely adheres to teacher-centered mode of learning. Part of the reason for this slow transition is partially due to the intellectual orientation of the lesser-developed world that is either predominantly pre-modern or modern. The other reason for this postponement is owing to the unstructured nature of student-centered mode of learning and post-modernism generally.

Although post-modernism was necessary to check and balance the absolute rigidity of pre-modern and modernist movements, it however fundamentally suffers from lack of structure and coherence (O'Donnell, 2003). While this can be regarded as a strength of the movement as a whole, it can potentially have an adverse effect on how the movement is interpreted and implemented. Similarly, the student-centered mode of learning has no discernable structure and can easily go off tangent. Understandably therefore, implementing a successful student-centered style of learning can be fairly tricky. It is precisely this conundrum that this article seeks to investigate.

Notwithstanding the general lack of structure and coherence, the most standout manifestation of a typical student-centered approach is what we popularly refer to as a 'tutorial'. A tutorial typically comprises of a group of no more than 10-12 students and a designated tutor or instructor. The purpose of a tutorial essentially is to encourage students to actively participate in class discussions in the presence of a qualified tutor. On the one hand, the tutor is merely required to play a facilatatory role and is not supposed to dominate and overshadow class discussions. Whereas on the other hand, each and every student is ideally required to proactively and enthusiastically participate during the class (MacKinnon & Bacon, 2015).

Though seemingly straightforward, running a successful tutorial is no plain sailing. With the role of the students and the tutors intentionally not clearly defined, a tutorial can go horribly wrong. From one or two students dominating the entire tutorial to chaotic and unruly class discussions, and from a tutor delivering a teacher-centered style lecture to him/her not being involved at all, a tutorial can go haywire in many different ways. Furthermore, every academic discipline is essentially different, which entails that the tutorials have to be tailored according to the requirements of their respective disciplines. This would mean that there can be no universal strategy to run tutorials successfully, as each tutorial would have to first cater to the demands of its own respective academic discipline.

Given this predicament, proposing an adequate model tutorial is clearly a daunting task. Nevertheless, I have endeavored to propose a model by drawing on relevant literature and my own personal experience. While it is clearly far from perfect, the proposed model tutorial can potentially be instructive for any prospective future transition to student-centered mode of learning, especially in Pakistan. Additionally, tutors and instructors in the discipline of political science and IR all over the world will hopefully find the model useful and thought provoking.

Proposed Model for Running a Political Science/IR Tutorial

The first challenge to achieving a successful student-centric approach is to address what Haggis (2006) refers to as the student-teacher "mutual-misunderstanding" (p. 525). Understandably, when most students move from schools to Universities, they have their own understanding of what University learning entails- this

understanding is often rooted in their school learning experience. The University teachers on the other hand, have their own expectations of students, which at least in social sciences and humanities usually involves critical engagement with the reading material. However, since this expectation is often taken for granted, it is hardly ever communicated to students (Haggis, 2006). Gosling (2009) also highlights this problem by pointing out that the meanings of terms like critical and analytical are often taken for granted by lecturers and tutors.

This particularly was (and remains) a very serious problem in universities across Pakistan in particular. Here even post-graduate students come to University with their own expectations (which is often Rota learning practices and mindlessly memorizing everything they are given to read, instead of critically engaging with it). Although many students at Western Universities relatively have a better idea of what critical engagement entails, however most of them are still confused over how to go about it.

Communicating the "orientation of the discipline" (Haggis, 2006, p. 528) of what the discipline entails & requires of students at University level is of paramount importance and should be taken care of accordingly- instead of expecting students to figure this out on their own. Although I did initially talk about the importance of theories, conceptual understanding and critical engagement with the students during my first ever tutorial at St Andrews University, however it was firstly not enough and secondly, I never told them clearly of how it can be done, assuming on my part that they probably knew what it means (thus, I too was initially suffering from the student-teacher mutual misunderstanding).

This problem was particularly highlighted after the first round of essays when many students came up to me to discuss my feedback, and most of them had the same problem; how should they critically engage with the discourse? Now "the meanings of these terms are quite subject specific and tutors within the same discipline can have different expectations about what students need to do to demonstrate them in their work" (Gosling, 2009, p. 123). Within the discipline of International Relations and Security Studies, critical and analytical thinking is not possible without understanding key concepts and theories first.

This takes us to the problem of what Meyer and Land (2003) refer to as "threshold concepts" (p.3). The threshold concepts are described as "core-concepts" and "building-blocks" (p.3), which are key to understanding the subject as a whole. Meyer and Land argue that any difficulty in understanding and acknowledging these threshold concepts could lead to a state of "*liminality*- lack of authenticity" (p.10). Teaching of these threshold concepts becomes even more important when tutoring first and second year undergraduates, when most of the students are either unfamiliar or new to them. Furthermore, since they are the key to understanding the subject, therefore, without clarity of these threshold concepts, students will always find it hard to understand the discipline properly. Indeed the key to studying IR is familiarity with the threshold/core concepts- found mostly within the discipline's theoretical frameworks.

The centrality of threshold concepts, take us to the importance of theories in the study of Political Science and International Relations. Within the broader discipline of IR and Political Studies, it is not possible to think conceptually and analytically if one does not have a sound theoretical and conceptual understanding. Guzzini (2001) particularly argues that theory is part of all the leading journals within the field of IR and Political studies. Moreover, it is a requirement for any kind of academic work of international standard and therefore its role should not be undermined. He believes that the students must be made familiar with the concepts in IR- they should know how various concepts explain different events and why a certain concept is chosen over another (Guzzini, 2001). Familiarity with theory helps create "hermeneutical skills" (Guzzini, 2001, p. 105) among students who (through acquiring theoretical knowhow) become more reflexive- as they learn to "decipher the other's position in terms of their assumptions" (p. 105) and respond accordingly.

Within the discipline of International Relations, we walk a thin line between journalism and IR- the new undergraduate students particularly fail to see this difference and if they are not guided in time, then they will probably never understand the difference between IR and journalistic analysis of global affairs. Secondly, the students must be made familiar with the various concepts and theoretical position from the outset so that they not only understand the lectures of their respective Professors, but are also able to understand the academic literature in the field (which uses an overly theoretical language)- that cannot be understood if one does not have a sound theoretical background. Basic concepts and theories must therefore be given due importance in any tutorials and lectures.

Owing to the importance of these threshold concepts/theories, especially for first and second year IR undergraduates, I eventually decided to model my lectures and tutorials around them. In fact, the gradual evolution of my tutorials will reveal how, among other things, they have mainly been structured and re-structured to primarily facilitate understanding and application of key theoretical concepts.

There are generally just two or three 'tutorial questions' for discussion, which are typically laid out in any university's module handbooks. Mostly these general tutorial questions are too broad and often assume a prior understanding of basic threshold concepts in IR. Hence, over time I devised a way around it and prepared instead a list of about dozen short questions. These questions were made from core readings of the tutorial and covered all the basic theoretical concepts from the required readings.

The tutorial group/class was to be divided into further smaller groups of three or four students. They would roughly have 15-20 minutes to discuss the short questions among themselves first. After the smaller groups had discussed the short questions, I would proceed with a general group discussion, where I would get feedback from each group- and also give my own analysis on each individual question. In the end, I would sum up everything the group had discussed in the class and also show its academic and practical relevance.

This is a general layout of my very first tutorials, which suffered from various problems. The first problem I faced was of a few confident students that largely dominated the general group discussion. Second, in an effort to engage everyone in the general discussion, I could sense that some students felt forced to reply and were not confident (and sometimes even embarrassed) of their answers. Third, the whole activity was too dry and would eventually get too monotonous and repetitive with the passage of time. Fourth, despite my summing up the entire activity by the end of the class, the students were still not getting an example of the practical utility of the knowledge/concepts they were engaging with. And lastly, I could not tell if the students understood the important theoretical concepts and how new concepts related to the ones they discussed in the previous tutorials.

The first two problems that I faced, relate directly to the student-centric approach. A student-centric approach is simply ineffective if it fails to engage everyone (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009). Therefore, I had to find a solution to these problems to ensure successful implementation of the student-centric model in my class.

In order to address the first problem of preventing one or few students from dominating the discussion and ensuring complete participation, I decided to introduce more structure to my tutorials. I realized that in my attempt to encourage everyone's participation, I could not possibly take individual answer to every short question and finish my tutorials in time. Also I could not reduce the number of short questions because that would compromise key concepts covered during the tutorial. On the other hand, if I generally asked the group what they thought about the question (i.e. letting them decide who answers), then it was bound to be dominated by just one member of the group. In order to address this, I introduced a rule by which each group would be represented by a different person every time. This provided a dual solution of time management (as we would end up spending less time on every short question) and universal participation.

However, my attempt to engage everyone was resulting in forced participation, as many students were often reluctant and rather embarrassed to share their views, which takes us to my second problem. In order to address this problem of (what I would call) 'forced response', I decided to make each group (during the small in-group discussion) write their answer down through unanimous agreement (and if anyone disagreed with the group answer- then he/she could write their answer separately). This way, the shy students (who I think are mostly shy because of being embarrassed of giving a wrong answer) could confidently state the group answer, which even if wrong would encompass the whole group and not single out any one individual.

My remaining problems related, in one or the other, to the subject of threshold concepts. In order to address them, I decided to introduce one small activity at the end of each tutorial, which would not only engage everyone but also demonstrate practical knowledge of the theoretical concepts learned during the tutorials. In social sciences, it is very difficult to have class activities and one has to be very creative to do so. I decided that one of the ways I could do this would be to engage

the students with creating their own definition of the concerned topic of the tutorial. During one of my classes on the subject of 'sovereignty', for instance, I asked the students at the end of the class to come up with a realist definition of sovereignty (they had studied the theory of realism in their previous tutorial) within their smaller groups. I wanted them to demonstrate their knowledge of the key concepts and therefore told them to make their definitions in the light of what they had learned/discussed in the class. I also told them that their definitions do not have to make much sense and should only reflect and demonstrate their understanding of basic concepts.

I soon realized that such an 'end-class activity' encourages the students to engage more activity and constructively with the basic concepts- as the activity is designed to test the knowledge/skill gained through the tutorials and classes. Moreover, it not only ends the class on a high note but also offers the students something interesting and exciting to look forward to. It also forces them to pay more attention to the key concepts discussed during the tutorials, as they will have to apply them during the end-class activity. Also because the students are pitched against each other, it makes the activity competitive and spirited. A different activity at the end of every tutorial would also address the problem of repetition and dreariness.

During my lecture preparation, I pay special attention to my end-class activity and each week devote extra time devising a different one. The activities have ranged from making students come up with their own definitions of concepts they have just studied, to applying a key concept/theory to resolve an international crisis or to even understanding the global international order through a certain theoretical position.

An end-class activity would usually have small groups of three students each prepare their cases separately. After each group had prepared their cases from their respective theoretical stand points, they would present it to a fellow student group, which would listen to all the groups and then deliberate among themselves to decide which one they thought best presented the case. I made sure that the adjudicating group explained why they thought a certain group presented their case better than the others. I decided it would be better for the students to adjudicate themselves- so that they may take more interest in the activity and it would also extend them the opportunity to engage with the threshold concepts more freely (having me as the adjudicator often leads to slight hesitation and also less interest in the activity).

On top of these obvious class dynamics, I believe that a Tutor/Professor has an additional responsibility of being aware of any visible and hidden disabilities of students. There are often students who have certain needs, which are not special in the traditional sense but still demand individual attention of their teachers and if not addressed in time, could have devastating consequences.

I first realized this when one of my students (who was otherwise a regular attendant of my tutorials) failed to submit her compulsory essays. When I finally got around to discuss this with her in person, I realized that her reasons for not

submitting the essays were mainly fear and apprehension. She was just not sure of how to write an IR essay and had made outlines (which she shared with me) but could never convert them into essays. And since she just assumed on her own that what she had written was not an IR essay- she decided to not submit anything, assuming that she would fail anyway.

Her lack of confidence in her ability to produce an essay prevented her from writing one. I, somehow, do hold myself responsible for her failure, because as her tutor, I should have been more aware of her predicament. Just because her need was not obvious/visible did not mean she did not have one. I do, therefore, feel that some students may have some special needs that are often beyond the otherwise obvious disabilities.

This is a classic example of student-teacher "mutual-misunderstanding" (Haggis, 2006, p. 525). I initially assumed that all students were aware of how to produce an essay and if anyone struggled, they would come to me themselves, whereas my student clearly struggled with her essay and was too hesitant to come to me directly and share her concerns. These needs could perhaps be incorporated into what Gosling (2009) refers to as "learning needs" (p. 114) of students. And as tutors, it is our responsibility to identify these special learning needs in time and take appropriate measures accordingly. If I had taken the matter up seriously the first time she did not submit her essay then perhaps she would not have failed the module. In order to avoid such mutual-misunderstandings, it is imperative therefore to pay due attention to the special learning needs of students that are often not evident. Running a successful tutorial thus not only demands effective planning and strategizing, it is also equally crucial to be attentive and perceptive at all times.

Conclusion

The linear progression of my tutorials and classes over the course of many years shows how I have painstakingly endeavored to implement a successful student-centric teaching approach. My rule of a different student representing the group each time a question is put to them ensures universal participation. Having the students write their group answers down, effectively addresses the problem of 'forced participation' on the part of less-confident and shy students, as the students do not bear individual responsibility for their answer. The short questions prepared before each tutorial address the extremely important issue of familiarizing students with threshold concepts in IR and political science. The 'end-class activity' serves the dual purpose of constructively engaging the students with the practical application of key theoretical concepts and making the tutorials stimulating and engaging. Lastly, I have learnt the harsh way that few students may have special needs that are often not obvious or disabilities in the traditional sense but still demand direct and immediate attention of their teachers or instructors.

It is important to point out in the end that the proposed student-centric tutorial model also has its fair share of limitations. To begin with, it is first and foremost a

product of my own subjective experiences and inferences. Although, I have tried to approach the topic as objectively as possible, it is still not entirely possible to separate it from my inherent biases. Therefore, any application of this model will have to first take my subjectivity into account. Secondly, the model is essentially inspired by teaching and tutoring in the discipline of IR and Political Science. Its relevance for other disciplines and social sciences generally will therefore have to be determined by tutors and instructors of the respective fields. The model, in other words, cannot simply be generalized and must be tailored according to the demands of individual instructors and their respective disciplines.

In spite of these somewhat obvious limitations, the proposed model offers a unique and innovative way to run student-centered tutorials. It is particularly relevant for Pakistani universities that are slowly and gradually moving away from the teacher-centric approach. The proposed model will hopefully prove to be particularly helpful during the initial transitionary phase.

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