
Sustainable Development Goals and General Education Core Courses Offered by the Department of English

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Original Article

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Abstract

This paper proposes to include the United Nations' seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in core curriculum for twofold benefit of improving the higher education system in Pakistan according to contemporary global needs and to advance the overall condition of the country via SDGs implementation at grassroots level. I recommend incorporating SDGs in academia while using the dialogic teaching methodology proposed by Freire. Theoretical framework proposed in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed endorses freedom, critical thinking, and shared authority. To elaborate, I'll discuss my experience of teaching an advanced writing core course with two aims: One, to teach the regulated course contents to help students improve their writing and presentation skills; second, to help the students enhance their critical thinking and train them to be more conscientious citizens. The findings suggest implementing these practices of freedom, critical thinking, and shared authority while adapting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the English department's core curriculum.

English is a compulsory subject for students enrolled in all the degrees at undergraduate level in Pakistan just like with many other countries globally. Such a situation makes the department of English the only department that interacts with, and teaches core English courses to, students from every other department on campus. This situation makes this department ideal for implementation of campus-wide practices. I pilot-tested this idea of incorporating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in teaching one of my core courses i.e., advanced Writing & Communications (WRCM II) offered by the Department of English at Forman Christian College University, Pakistan.

I have closely worked with the department of English at five universities i.e. The University of Gujrat (Pakistan), Government College University Lahore (Pakistan), University of Chenab (Pakistan), Louisiana State University (United States), and Forman Christian College—A Chartered University (Pakistan). The Department of English at these universities offers more than one core courses that the students enrolled in all the departments at undergraduate level must take and successfully pass. I, both as the student as well as the teacher, have felt the problem of content repetition in these core English courses which makes the advanced level course redundant. Students show lack of interest upon encountering the redundancy.

In this paper I propose making Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a significant part of the advanced level of writing, communication, and rhetoric courses. Adding SDGs to the advanced

course, first of all, will take the redundancy away. It will bring a focused and unified angle to the advanced writing, communication, and rhetoric courses across all universities. Moreover, higher education has made it mandatory to highlight SDGs in every research. This practice will introduce our students with SDGs at an initial stage. The students will be able to find their research interest through its lens irrespective of their main department. Research on SDGs in their freshman or sophomore years will help develop students' critical thinking and will give them enough space to practice intellectual freedom and shared authority. This awareness will introduce students with the concept of research at an early stage. Most importantly, this practice will familiarize students with the imminent global issues and the possible solutions. It will connect students with their surroundings with an added sense of responsibility. With the diversity of topics, the teacher will be able to direct each student towards their area of interest. Finally, depending on the teacher's pedagogical take, such a course can be effective in turning students into conscientious citizens of the community.

For students to take flight of freedom from oppression via critical thinking, autonomy, and agency, SDGs provide them a ground to stand. State of ignorance is the state of oppression. Paulo Freire claims in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that state of freedom comes with responsibility and consistent effort. To overcome oppression, according to Freire, "People must critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (47). The students in their journey from oppression to freedom must actively participate in the struggle. Freedom isn't given as a gift, rather a state achieved through struggle toward being a more useful member of humanity. Especially in a developing country like Pakistan, with limited resources and plethora of issues, we need all hands on deck. Youth is a good resource to be engaged in such cases as the majority population of Pakistan is in their early thirties. Moreover, this engagement shouldn't be such that the teacher claims to be the sole owner of knowledge and the student remains a passive, silent receiver.

According to Freire, to form more useful community members who can fight against oppression, the students/learners must engage in the dialectical process where the knowledge isn't imparted by the teacher to the learner rather explored in a mutual discussion and exploration. Moreover, the process is dialectical not only in a sense that it is explored mutually; rather also in a sense that it is complemented by both thought and action. This is how, according to Freire, people can fight for their rights. "Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation" (65). Meaning if there is a problem in a society and the citizens believe they are oppressed then they themselves should be the one engaging in critical and liberating dialogue about it that should lead toward action-based solution.

My pedagogical practice is based on strengthening my students' awareness and sense of responsibility as the global citizens towards issues present in their life and society. Once the students acknowledge that a problem exists that needs their attention, working towards its solution means that they are accepting their responsibility to gain freedom from its oppression. This kind of teaching style avoids the banking method, criticized by Freire because of its oppressive nature. The banking style implies the students are passive receivers of the information, and the teacher is considered as the sole authority. Freire famously writes "authentic education is not carried on by "A" for "B" or by "A" about "B," but rather by "A" with "B"" (93). Authentic thinking based on reality happens only in mutual conversation; not in what Freire calls "ivory towers" (77) i.e., isolation and privilege. That is why avoiding the traditional banking pedagogical style is important to invoke critical thinking and a sense of responsibility in the students that leads the participants to freedom.

By connecting thought and action a teacher liberates the students: "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (79). The sense of freedom comes only with this critical thinking and corollary action, because in this case

the participants have charted their course of action with their own mind and struggle. It wasn't pre-given to them by some oppressing authority. I aim for this praxis in my pedagogy. In this paper I'll discuss an advanced Writing and Communication course as an example that I taught in Fall 2023 in Forman Christian College (A Chartered University). In such a pedagogical technique the knowledge is not unidirectional, rather everyone is teaching and learning at the same time.

Although in an institutional setting we cannot get away with the certain roles of a teacher and a student as well as the authority/responsibility that lies with the roles; we can still design our courses in a way that stimulate reflection and creativity via what Freire terms "problem posing education" (84). In such a teaching style a teacher does not give ready-made answers to the students to regurgitate in their final exam. In problem posing education the teacher poses the problem and encourages dialogues. The dialogues then lead to critical thinking and praxis carrying values important to the process like solidarity, humility, hope for better future, faith in their ability, trust on each other, and profound love for humanity in general.

To invoke critical thinking, I decided to engage my students to work on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations because of their relevance, universality, and social appeal as explained earlier. The 17 goals are "No Poverty; Zero Hunger; Good Health and Wellbeing; Quality Education; Gender Equality; Clean Water and Sanitation; Affordable and Clean Energy; Decent Work and Economic Growth; Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure; Reduced Inequalities; Sustainable Cities and Communities; Responsible Consumption and Production; Climate Action; Life Below Water; Life on Land; Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions; and Partnerships for the Goals" (United Nations). These goals serve as a call for global partnership to achieve peace and prosperity for all.

Each country has picked some priority areas depending on the country's needs e.g., Pakistan has highlighted ten priority areas. Often the high priority areas overlap. Chaudhry highlights in his research that gender inequality, education, and economic growth are interlinked. Similarly, Khan and Mehmood, by using research of Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, highlight how investing in human capital has a higher return as compared to investment in physical capital i.e., overlapping of economic growth, environmental stability, education, and gender equity.

The Department of Liberal Arts offers an effective platform to address the overlapping domains and initiate the required SDGs changes. Moreover, the results of the conducted research are further useful for implementation in Pakistan. The higher education in Pakistan has a potential to benefit from this symbiotic relationship in return. How? Because, being in a dilapidated state, Pakistani higher education needs massive improvement. It is sad to notice that what Kibbee highlighted in 1962, holds true for Pakistani academia in 2024 as well because of political and economic instability. Kibbee pinpointed the political and economic frustration of Pakistani university students as the most significant factors hindering the students' intellectual growth and demanded to seek new grounds for healthy student development. Tarar adds to this discussion that instead of a blanket approach toward acceptance or rejection of higher education policies, there is a need for deeper analysis for critical changes in the desired areas. I believe that implementation of SDGs in higher education curriculum complements the highlighted needs.

SDGs offer new grounds for healthy development by directing students' energy toward a constructive outcome whether it is Pakistan or anywhere else. This new direction will engage the students in critical thinking and research. This shift will improve the higher education system. Faize, Khan, and Kalim demand improvement in the higher education system by moving from teaching-focused to critical-thinking-and-research -focused university environment. The knowledge-based economy, again, complements both the higher education system and SDGs. Similarly, Hoodbhoy stresses on changing the higher education system from grassroots level and to train teachers and students to have high moral standards along with shared sense of purpose, community work, ability

of critical enquiry, and reasoned decision-making. All these traits equally complement SDGs implementation and higher education improvement in a country.

In terms of SDGs, although the world has made some improvement, still there's a long way to go. Akhtar believes countries need more than setting up task forces. I believe academia can offer the platform for deep structural reforms that Akhtar asks for in his report titled "70 Years of Development: The Way Forward." Implementation of SDGs requires policy execution at grassroots level. Youth in the universities offers a very fertile ground for the purpose. Clark indirectly agrees in "What will it Take to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?" by declaring that overall SDGs implementation needs everyone's contribution. It reiterates Akhtar's point that we need more than task forces. We need mass realization and transformation in the way of thinking and living. This research proposes to materialize the vision through a combination of SDGs and higher education. The aim is to ameliorate higher education in any place through implementation of SDGs via academia.

I initiated this research to implement my proposed idea. While making these sustainable development goals a part of the writing and communication course, I had to make sure the priority stays the syllabus regulated and provided by the WRCM branch of the department of English, thanks to the WRCM branch in-charge Dr. Ambreen Javed. As an instructor, I was supposed to follow the pre-given books, assignments, and grading criteria. It means my practice should be easy to follow for all those instructors who have already set their syllabi for the advanced writing, rhetoric, and communication courses. Adding SDGs to the course outline provided my class with a whole new range of topics that students could directly relate to whether they are from business, education, economics, or any other major. Here is the pre-given course description, texts, and outcomes provided by the WRCM branch that we needed to follow (I believe direct quoting this information will help the instructors seeking to design such a course):

"Course Description

This course is a continuity of Writing and Communication 101. Students will build on what they learned in WRCM 102 while engaging with research using authentic academic sources. In the first of two major papers and presentations, students will analyze and report the history and status quo of a current controversy in Pakistan or the world. The second paper and presentation build on the first with the addition of the student's view on and possible solution for the controversy. For the second major presentation students will analyze their audience beforehand in order to craft and deliver a maximally persuasive speech in the PechaKucha style.

Texts

The readings for the course have primarily been selected from four Open Educational Resources. They are as follows:

- Babin, Burnell, Pesznecker, Rosevear, and Wood. 2017. *The Word on College Reading and Writing*.
- Guptill, Amy. 2016. *Writing in college: From competence to excellence*. Open SUNY Textbooks.
- *Stand up, Speak out: The practice and ethics of public speaking*. 2016. University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.
- *Writing for Success*. 2015. University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Course Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will:

- Understand how to craft a research paper, deliver a compelling persuasive speech, and form an annotated bibliography.
- Be confident in using English for academic writing.

- Know how to efficiently use MLA and Chicago documentation styles for formatting their papers as well as avoiding plagiarism.
- Be able to contribute thoughtfully to a scholarly conversation.
- Create and present solutions to current problems.
- Be able to connect argumentation strategies with what they observe in real life
- Confidently holding valid, valuable opinions worth sharing.
- Be able to research independently and write about any topic of their choice.
- Discover their personal strengths and weaknesses related to writing, speaking, and listening and identify the strategies for improvement.
- Understand the context of and value others' opinions on their chosen topics.
- Learn to fashion solutions related to the debates/controversies together.
- Care deeply about current issues and getting enthusiastically engaged with them

Writing Assignments	50%
1. Topic Proposal/Research Plan – (700-800 words, introduction of topic as well as research plan with timeline)	10%
2. Annotated Bibliography -It should be in OPVL format and can be submitted with the controversy analysis paper.	10%
3. Controversy Analysis Paper – (1250-1500 words, history and current status of a public controversy according to strict outline, 10 sources minimum with annotated bibliography)	10%
4. Research Paper - (2000-2500 words, corrected Controversy Analysis paper with addition of survey results and STUDENT's view/analysis)	20%
Speaking Assignments	30%
1. Controversy Analysis Speech (4-minute speech on something related to topic, 16-slide PowerPoint 15 seconds each; PechaKucha style)	15%
2. Paper Presentation - (3-4 minutes, summary of paper including four sources clearly cited)	15%
Assignment (Peer Review before the submission of Final Research Paper)	10%
Final Portfolio (Corrected drafts of writing, Annotated bibliography, self-assessment letter of 200-300 words.)	10%” (WRCM 102)

Now these were the texts, course outcomes, assignments, and the grading criteria that I followed while teaching this advanced writing and communication course. I introduced the students with the SDGs in the very first class and, while discussing the outline, I made sure they know that their assignments will focus on one of the 17 sustainable goals. My goal as an instructor was to teach them the assigned course content and also to make them conscientious citizens by making them a part of this global endeavor. Once they were familiarized with the SDGs, I gave them liberty to choose the goal that speaks to them, i.e., the one they find interesting or relevant to their field (since this course had enrollments from every department on campus).

After selecting their SDGs, the students conducted study on it and discussed their research with the group. After a general global introduction, we narrowed down our focus to the national and local level of the same SDG. At this point they learned about how to narrow down and choose their research topics. Upon selecting their topics, the students explored a controversy pertaining to their topic and presented it in front of the class followed by an interactive session. Here I encouraged the students to reflect on the role that they play (consciously or unconsciously) against their selected sustainable development goal.

To elaborate I'll cite an example where a student was working on the SDG "Clean Water and Sanitation," they realized how people have unsanitary practices, which made them realize that those people do not have access to clean water. They gathered that happens because there is not an equal access to water. They realized they themselves waste a lot of water while washing their cars while people do not have access to clean water for absolute necessities. Similarly, the student working on Zero Hunger realized how they waste food while there are many people sleeping on empty stomachs, and so on. Alongside exploring SDGs, we also discussed topics like research ethics, finding resources, avoiding plagiarism, MLA formatting, and writing annotated bibliographies. Since each student had a different topic (even if two students were working on the same SDG, their research topics were different from each other), it helped us avoid any redundancy or copy/pasting. The students understood the process, were able to critically engage with the material, had discussions in the class, were able to raise any concern/s in mandatory one-on-one conferences, and made use of the office hours beyond that.

By the fifth week the students had a clear idea of the research plan for the rest of the semester. We discussed as a group how we can inculcate good writing habits and tackle the difficulties. At this point I wanted to bring the students' attention to their immediate community i.e., Forman Christian College University. After we discussed our general observations, I guided the students to draft a questionnaire to interview at least three members of their community to take their viewpoints on their chosen controversy. The students got to learn further about their topic as well as became familiar with the process of revising and refining their research. In my observation, one of the main misunderstandings often my research students have is that their first draft should be accepted without revisions like a submitted assignment. It is important to familiarize the students with the importance of revision and editing at an early stage while conducting research.

The students were able to present the interview findings to their group and shared obstacles as well. We headed towards the final essay that included the semester-long reading, research findings, and personal opinions. Here the praxis happened in two different sessions: one, where the students were able to give suggestions to the university management; and second, where the students shared their self-resolution. By self-resolution I mean each student shared the changes they have promised to bring in their own life and behavior to contribute towards a more sustainable society. Here's the link to the pictures of the Self-Resolution Day posted on the Facebook page of the FCCU Department of English:

<https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1038782964067318&set=pb.100038068735990.-2207520000&type=3>

The written essays on their SDGs and Community-based topics went through peer-reviewing. Here I'd suggest the instructors to have clear guidelines on peer-reviewing and assign a grade to the activity, so the students take it seriously. The students submitted their essays after making the changes suggested by the reviewers. It is important to grade and return the student work on time with enough comments to help the students improve on it before submitting it in their final portfolio.

I was able to get the student feedback in two forms to assess how far I've succeeded in achieving the set goals. While the university course evaluation was helpful in giving me generic feedback on the course and my pedagogy, it was not sufficient to analyze the particular goals. Hence, I conducted a separate course survey. The response was overwhelmingly positive and has encouraged me to present this pedagogical idea to my colleagues for adoption. For the lack of space, I've attached the feedback forms instead of annotating and explaining them.¹ I hope that we bring this change uniformly in our advanced core English courses in the higher education institutes

¹ The respondents' names have been removed to respect privacy.

across the country. I couldn't think of a better journal/platform to propose this idea and uniformly initiate this practice. To conclude, I strongly suggest incorporating Sustainable Development Goals in the advanced level compulsory English reading, writing, communication, and rhetoric courses.

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