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Teaching Political Science Research Methods in Hungary: Transferring Student-centred Teaching Practices into a Subject-focused Academic Culture

Abstract

This article discusses the challenges of moving toward student-centredness in East-Central Europe through the example of Hungary's subject-focused academic culture and the (re-)design of a political science research methods course at the University of Szeged for Spring 2012. Although countries participating in the Bologna process undersigned the importance of student-centredness, few countries have actually yet moved in this direction. In addition, we know very little about how these instructional methods work outside the Western democratic context. I show that research into teaching is an important means to improve the process of education and that there are specific problems in transferring student-centredness into post-Communist higher education settings. Finally, I argue that knowing one's teaching context is vital for planning student-centred courses effectively, which would be greatly fostered by experiencing other teaching contexts through early-career teacher exchanges. The European Commission has recently affirmed its commitment to staff exchanges, but such opportunities are only likely to be beneficial if they go beyond the current 6-week long exchange scheme that the Erasmus program offers.

Key words: teaching and learning, post-Communist higher education, research methods, Hungary

Introduction

Student-centred higher education rests on a strong commitment to students' needs in the educational process and is a more efficient way of instruction than traditional content- or teacher-centred approaches (Huba and Freed 2000, 2). The increasing number of students paying for their education, shrinking funding, the diversification of the student body in the last decade, and the desire for a knowledge-based European economy make changes toward a more efficient way of instruction imperative all over Europe (Pleschová et al. 2013). Countries participating in the Bologna process and the European Commission have recognised the importance of student-centredness as a means to improve student learning (London Communiqué 2007; European Commission 2008).

Despite this, only a few countries in Europe have already invested in student-centred instruction. It is a popular way of instruction in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. However, it has been much less embraced in the post-Communist setting. Some experimental programs are being run in a few countries, such as Slovakia (Simon and Pleschová manuscript) and Estonia (Karm, Remmik and Haamer 2012), but student-centredness has not been accepted on a large scale and many other post-Communist countries are yet to follow suit.

Transferring student-centred practices into teacher-centred contexts is strewn with many difficulties for which the existing literature on methods education provides little help. Methods education is an immensely popular topic among political scientists, who devote numerous conference papers (e.g. Ryan et al. 2012; Shingles, Becerra and Pencek 2006) and journal articles (e.g. Leston-Bandeira 2013; Thies and Hogan 2005; Clark 2011) to the issue[1], but the discussion remains within the Anglo-Saxon context. Because of the long and widespread commitment to student-centredness in these countries, the discussion does not problematise the learning context. Instead, it takes the commitment of the higher education system or the higher education institution to student-centred education as a given. There are, of course, a few books (Weimer 2002; Nygaard and Holtham 2008) in the broader instructional development literature that address the problems concerning the introduction of student-centredness, but they also remain silent about the transferability of this approach to different socio-cultural contexts.

Therefore, we know very little about the transferability of student-centredness outside the social and political context of long-established Western democracies. Higher education, as well as politics and society, in East-Central Europe have taken a very different developmental path. Consequently, not only do we know very little of methods education and student-centredness in the post-Communist context, it is also unclear how instructional methods used in Western democracies perform in the former. For countries that are yet to introduce the student-centred approach to higher education (or indeed to their education systems in general), it is important to understand what happens when student-centred methods are introduced into a university teaching context where students are used to dealing with teacher- or subject-centredness. How does one best use the new methods in order to improve learning in the post-Communist setting? How does the job of professors change as a result, and how do students react to student-centred methods?

I explore these issues through the political science research methods course I teach for Master's students at the University of Szeged in Hungary. Hungarian higher education is an excellent example of post-Communist higher education and its problems. Research methods courses can effectively deliver employability skills in such non-vocational programs as political science (Clark 2011). Relevant employability skills include effective argumentation, structural thinking, library research, and source evaluation. The importance of these skills for the job market makes it vital that they are taught in the most effective manner.

I show that active learning is helpful in teaching higher order skills and that students perceive student-centredness positively. Based on studying the post-Communist setting, I argue that the current educational development literature on transferring student-centredness must be augmented in two ways. First, the redistribution of power in the classroom is a much more complex issue in the authoritarian social context of post-Communist states. It requires patience and long-term democratic socialisation to overwrite old academic and social practices. Second, I contend that the introduction of student-centredness can only succeed if teachers regularly reflect on their teaching in order to continue improving it. New teaching contexts may give rise to unexpected problems, which can only be tackled successfully through reflective teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), that is, research into teaching. This article is a narrative of course development through

reflective inquiry, which also stresses that the introduction of new methods, as well as the improvement of teaching, is an iterative process.

Finally, this article points to the need of a joint effort in departments, faculties, and universities, as well as a deep understanding of one's teaching context and students, if student-centredness is to be introduced successfully. In other words, post-Communist countries must embrace student-centredness fully so as to dispense with contextual obstacles to the effective introduction of this new approach. Furthermore, I contend that a thorough understanding of contextual factors is impossible without having a comparative perspective provided by teaching experience in a markedly different educational setting. Teaching experience abroad – or a dialogue between learner-centred and teacher-centred academic environments – would substantially contribute to the adaptation of student-centredness in new contexts. Therefore, semester- or year-long early-career teacher exchange opportunities across teaching cultures are commendable. The European Commission (2013) has recently affirmed its commitment to staff exchanges, but such opportunities are only likely to be beneficial if they go beyond the current 6-week long exchange scheme that the Erasmus program offers.

Student-centred education

Traditional teaching methods consist of a fairly passive lecture-discussion format in which students mostly listen and are asked to recite content knowledge in the same way they received it. Education is based on the transmission of knowledge: teachers act as the source of knowledge with all the answers, and students are only required to memorize information (Huba and Freed 2000, 3, 35). Student-centred education has a broader conception of learning, aspiring to foster the understanding of information, skills development, and the integration of skills and knowledge. It aims to prepare students to solve problems and be independent learners who are able to continually upgrade their knowledge (Weimer2002, 51; Nygaard and Holtham 2008; Blumberg 2009).

To achieve these, students need to be actively engaged with the material and become active participants of the learning process, which requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of the process of education and the identity of students and teachers. In this new student-centred approach, the

primary responsibility for learning is transferred to the student, which shifts the balance of power in the classroom to a more equal relationship between students and instructors (Nygaard and Holtham 2008;Wiemer2002). The importance of content decreases as it becomes a means to skills development achieved by first-hand learning experience. Finally, assessment comes to mean more than grading; it also serves as a means of feedback. While grades give students a snapshot of where they stand currently, feedback provides guidance about how they could improve (Huba and Freed2000, 152-5). Courses should be designed mindful of the outcomes students should achieve by the end of the course and align activities and assessment methods with these (Biggs and Tang 2007).

Finally, the context where learning takes place must also be considered, as it plays an important role in selecting learning outcomes, activities, and assessment methods. For example, only activities with adequate support (e.g. online platform) should be considered. Additionally, courses should not target some generic learner, but rather the students that will be taking the course. Therefore, we need to understand the identities and situation of learners (Reeves 2006).

The teaching context

I planned the research methods course in harmony with the principles of student-centredness, keeping in mind that change should be gradual; that is, only as much power should be transferred as students can handle (Weimer 2002, 29). I put emphasis on defining the rules of the game, enabling students to work on their own and learn together and from each other. This meant that I delineated expectations, learning outcomes, requirements, grading policies, weekly tasks and readings, and classroom conduct in my syllabus. I handed out tasks with a clear description of expectations of what students needed to do in order to receive an A (in practice, a 5, as grades range from 1 to 5 where 2 is the lowest passing grade). I introduced regular, continuous assessment and provided written feedback to students. In the classroom, I moved away from lecturing – only turning to short mini-lectures occasionally – and relied on the Socratic method of teaching through questions, as well as group- and pair-work. I gave students a free choice in selecting the topic of their research writing, which aimed to have students apply the abstract principles they had learned. I designed this research writing process as a cumulative assignment with four exercises and submission deadlines. I provided students with

feedback at each step so that they could improve their papers for the next draft. I made myself accessible to students and encouraged them to contact me. Even though these might seem to be standard practice for many British and American higher education institutions, as I will show below, these were radical moves away from current practice in Hungarian higher education.

Yet, student confusion in class and the extremely poor quality of student work in the spring of 2010 demonstrated that something was amiss. Upon reflection, it became obvious that the course attempted to cover too much in terms of both skills and knowledge, which overburdened students and did not accomplish as much as I had expected. However, not until I spent a year teaching at Southern Polytechnic State University (SPSU) in Marietta, Georgia in the United States in 2010-11 as a Fulbright scholar did I realise that my inability to clearly understand the teaching context in Hungary was the main problem. The comparative perspective that another education system provided allowed me to see the needs of my Hungarian students better. Thus, upon my retsurn to Hungary, I redesigned the course after delineating the contextual factors more precisely. I determined that the following aspects of the context were important: the teaching methods currently used in political science education, the general characteristics – knowledge, skills, and disciplinary background – of Hungarian students, the development and current state of Hungarian political science, and the departmental curriculum.

As higher education in East-Central Europe in general (Vihan 2005; Karm, Remmik, and Haamer 2012), Hungarian higher education has its roots in Prussian and Soviet conceptions of higher education, which aim at creating an obedient population who learn to defer to leaders (and teachers) with power and authority. Despite political transition to democracy in 1989, a similar democratic turn did not materialise in social practices, including (higher) education. The prevailing approach to teaching and learning has not been questioned. Educational reform focused on content, structural changes, and issues of financing, but attention has only recently been called to the teaching approach and the need for change (Sárdi 2012).

Thus, despite some variation among disciplines and individual teachers, Hungarian higher education remains characterised by an extreme focus on the subject – the material to be transmitted – and the professors' needs. In terms of teaching, this amounts to a hierarchical, formal, and quite

distant relationship between professors and students. Professors do not see pastoral care as their responsibility and hardly know their students due to their approach to teaching and large student numbers. On the surface, students see their professors as unquestionable sources of authority in their discipline and classroom. Below the surface, students are quite critical of their instructors and harbour little respect for most of them, which also translates into aloofness and scepticism with regard to the educational process.

The emphasis on content and professors' needs leads to formal classroom practices. Professors usually lecture, and students are relegated to the passive roles of listeners and note-takers. Students are generally not asked to move beyond the first level of the Bloom's taxonomy (Forehand 2005), i.e. the recall of data or information. They are expected to memorise their notes and demonstrate – often orally – that they have done so. The system discourages creativity, and skills development and skills acquisition are not priorities. Nonetheless, teachers often expect skills development to happen simply because they have demonstrated the skill in question in the classroom. Professors primarily rely on summative assessment that is accomplished in the six-week long exam period that follows the teaching term. In the case of lecture courses, such summative assessment is the obligatory form of assessment; professors have more leeway in the case of seminars and lab sections. Ongoing formative assessment during the teaching term is rare, and often in the form of additional in-class testing, student presentations, or written summaries that lack any clear purpose in the learning process. The outcome is that students' knowledge is theoretical and they are surface-learners who retain little of the material after passing the exam. At the same time, clear expectations are not set. Syllabi most often contain the name of the course and the instructor, a list of weekly topics, and the details of the course textbook (if there is one).

Accordingly, Hungarian students do relatively little during the teaching term other than attending lectures, but spend most of their time studying – or, rather, memorising – for exams during the six-week-long exam periods. In line with this, their reading comprehension and summarising skills are excellent. They are rather sceptical about the worth of courses taken and do not see the value of their courses for their future. They are not accustomed to being asked for their opinion and, thus, are not well-versed in supporting it with arguments. Skills related to research (e.g. library and online

research, evaluating the reliability of sources, writing research papers) are underdeveloped and so is creative thinking, which has been deemphasised throughout their formal education. Therefore, unlike my American students at SPSU, they are generally wary of creative tasks. Creative tasks during which professors recede to the background are often thought of as cheap ways for the professor to shirk their teaching responsibilities.

However, Hungarian university students are more mature than American students of the same age and capable of working on their own – at least when it comes to preparing for tests. As opposed to my success-oriented American students, most Hungarian students focus on avoiding failure, which carries a strong social stigma. This explains their general avoidance of and anxiety toward tackling ill-defined problems where correct and incorrect answers and the notions of success and failure are more difficult to define. Another consequence is that students prefer not to state an opinion or answer questions in fear of being perceived as stupid.

The broader context of political science as a discipline in Hungary is also important to consider. In line with the continental European tradition, political science is primarily based on a qualitative research tradition, but, unlike in Western Europe, has little, albeit slowly increasing, methodological consciousness (Szabó 2002b). Scholars using quantitative methods are a small minority. Under Communism, political science was largely underdeveloped as a discipline. It did not serve the interest of the political elite to have a large number of scholars analysing their political deeds. What existed was predominantly theoretical and heavily influenced by Marxism-Leninism, although political influence and a heavily theoretical and lecture-based approach had characterised Hungarian higher education long before Communism (Ladányi 1999). Political science departments have traditionally belonged to legal faculties and, thus, the discipline also has a legalistic/legal-philosophical orientation to this day. Departments were essentially support units for law programs and the university at large, since they primarily taught general education courses. At best, they offered a special studies program (which is a first step in developing a minor study program) that concluded in a diploma supplement (Szabó 2002a).

Political science flourished as a discipline after the fall of Communism in 1989. The first political science degree program was initiated in 1993 (Szabó 2002a).[2] Academic freedom was re-

established and the ideological orientation of the fallen regime was removed. However, many other characteristics of the discipline and the higher education system remained intact. Political science today is theoretically oriented, contains little if any empirical research, or belongs to the field of contemporary political history. Consequently, students are rarely exposed to empirical research and learn to take a historian's attitude to the study of politics.

Furthermore, during Communism, what little political research existed was taken out of the universities and conducted primarily at the Academy of Sciences. Even though this was rectified after 1989, the reestablishment of universities as research centres was only partially successful (Szabó 2002a, 2002b). Thus, students rarely have the opportunity to see their professors as researchers in addition to teachers. Furthermore, many established Hungarian political scientists are either directly engaged in politics or are household faces, since they frequently appear on TV to comment on political events or write opinion pieces in newspapers (Szabó 2010). The result is the surviving presence of politics at the universities and a confusion of what doing political science entails: students have difficulty separating political analysts from political scientists and political advocacy from research.

Two facts further aggravate the situation. First, political science has not opened toward alternative assessment and teaching methods, and students are not regularly instructed to learn to work on their own (Szabó 2010). Second, political science and international relations MA programs at the University of Szeged take about half of their students from other disciplines with very different research backgrounds, such as languages, journalism, or history. The distribution of survey respondents – students taking the research methods course in Spring 2012 – according to their undergraduate majors is listed in table 1.

Table 1. Survey respondents by their undergraduate majors, political science research methods course, Spring 2012.

Major	No. of students
Political science or international relations	26

political science	9
international relations	17
Language	19
Journalism	3
History	3
Total Number of Students (respondents)	**51**

The research methods course is formally called the Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Political Research and offered by the International and Regional Studies Institute (formerly European Studies Centre) as a compulsory subject for 3 ECTS credits (out of 120 needed for degree completion). The course meets once for 90 minutes a week for 13 or 14 weeks. It is usually taken in the second term of the two-year International Relations and Political Science programs (University of Szeged 2012a, 2012b). The small number of credits and modest class time allocated to the course reflect a general feature of the graduate and undergraduate curricula of political science degree programs as well as the Hungarian higher education system in general. The purpose is to teach for breadth rather than depth, which requires students to complete a lot of courses in a variety of subjects and subfields. However, teaching for breadth does not favour methods education (Parker 2010). The belief that international relations is a different discipline rather than part of political science (Szabó 2010) also discourages methodological consciousness.

Accordingly, the bachelor programs completed by political science and international relations Master's students entail limited methods training and no methods courses. Language majors usually take academic writing courses, which focus on writing skills, but only touch upon some methodological issues. Undergraduate programs in Political Science and International Relations, the first degree of half of the students taking the research methods MA course, offer a course called *Introduction to the Primary Documents of Political Science*. This means that students are familiarised with several methods of data collection, but not with methods of data analysis.

Redesigning the course with the context in mind

In light of this, I redesigned the course to be offered in 2011-12. I began by strengthening the student-friendly aspects of the course. In order to help students to transition into a more active and independent learning environment, I explained to them what was happening and how their and my role changed in the process. So as to counterbalance any fear of the enormity and unfamiliarity of the task, I reassured them that I would be helping them whenever they thought they needed assistance and encouraged them to consult me. I prepared them for a more active in-class role by explaining to them that there are no stupid answers or questions. I also made it clear that incorrect answers are also helpful in pointing out problematic issues and will receive participation points. I aimed to reinforce student participation by giving students enough space to talk and demonstrating an encouraging attitude.

I also modified other things. First, understanding the teaching context helped me to cut down on content and ease the students' burden.[3] Since about half of my students had already learned about the vices and virtues of various methods of data collection, I placed the emphasis on data analysis, and taught data collection solely to review past knowledge or give students with other disciplinary backgrounds a working knowledge.

Focusing on the analysis of data was also useful in choosing the skills that I primarily wanted my students to develop during this course. Since analysis is both a methodological and a writing skill, I chose to focus on written argumentative and analytical skills. Because my students operate in a qualitative research tradition, I emphasise the acquisition of these methods. We do discuss the strength and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research, but substantially more time is devoted to qualitative research methods – especially structured focused comparison and case study research.

Students only get a general overview of statistical and mixed research methods. They read about them briefly and can see examples of them. I use the latter to point out how these research traditions compare to qualitative research and show them how to read statistical research papers with very little or no statistical background. Essentially, the idea is to remove their 'fear of numbers,' which arts and social science students commonly harbour by the time they have to take a compulsory

statistics course. I also encourage students to seek out elective courses if statistics interests them, and allow the small number of students who do have some statistical knowledge to write their term paper (a research proposal), using quantitative methods.

Accordingly, I redefined learning outcomes to be more specific, and expected that by the end of the course, students would be able to:

(1) list and define various concepts relating to methods of data collection and analysis,
(2) summarise and compare the strengths and weaknesses of methods of data collection and data analysis;
(3) apply (qualitative) methods and research strategies learned while designing their own research project.

Furthermore, knowing that dissertation supervision is often superficial and students can pursue their own interests while dissertating, I encourage students to start thinking about their dissertation research for their research proposal (term paper). In 2010 students had been asked to write a shorter – 10-12 page long – research project that entailed both a proposal and carrying out the proposed research, but this proved unrealistic in terms of workload and resulted in very poor execution. Therefore, I chose unrelated and shorter tasks early in the course to foster analytical thinking and writing. The research project that is half of a student's grade is a cumulative task, which is assessed four times during the term at different stages of the project: research question, literature review, research design, and final proposal. I provide feedback at each step so that students can improve the project at each stage.

Argumentative skills are developed during class. Students argue about the merits of positions, which they have to defend and support with evidence. Students also have a chance to ask questions or express their opinion if they disagree with a colleague's or the instructor's statement. Since students have only sporadically seen research writing, I translated a few articles from English language journals that serve as examples of, for instance, case selection or statistical research. Students are required to read these articles, which are then analysed in class. Next, they have to complete a small

in-class or homework exercise to reinforce their analytical and writing skills. In order to engage students, I use pair and group exercises frequently. I also give extra time to think about their responses (and make notes) to lessen their anxiety brought on by heretofore unexpected participation.

Assessing the redesigned course

Instructor's reflections

After I taught the course in Spring 2012, my personal impressions were mixed. While the course was now a much more compact unit with clearer purpose, students still seemed to be somewhat overburdened by the number of assignments, and we spent more time discussing the readings than I had anticipated. Nonetheless, most students worked hard and showed enthusiasm. I also noticed some disorientation during the first half of the course, as students were trying to understand what I expected of them: until then, 'how to learn' or 'how to prepare' had been self-evident. Now, they had to adjust to a very different teaching style. It appears that, no matter how carefully one prepares students for the change, some level of student confusion cannot be entirely avoided. Nonetheless, by the middle of the course, students seemed to find their way and voice. They became much more active and articulate. The number of student contacts via email or in person with me also increased. Some students were also willing to challenge my position in class, using rational arguments, which was also satisfying to see. I was also pleasantly surprised that my students demonstrated much greater creativity and playfulness than what their prior education and general student attitude made me expect: they responded very well to unusual assignments and group and pair work. This suggests that students are open to participating in new kinds of tasks, as long as those tasks are set up so that students see their usefulness.

What remains a constant feature of the course is a challenge from one or two students to my authority in the form of 'clever' questions or arguments at some point. This had caught me by surprise and continued to puzzle me until I explored the teaching context more deeply. I had expected that a student-centred approach would not only create a working space where students and professor engaged in the exchange and testing of ideas as equals, but it would actually *increase* the professor's authority, because authority is no longer dependent on power. Instead, it appears that, while

democratisation may have changed political institutions, it left long-standing, non-democratic socialisation and social dynamics intact. Students who have been socialised into difference and obedience to power and have seen authority flow from power both at schools and in society have difficulty in separating these two concepts. In the post-Communist setting, power and authority are seen as intertwined and giving up one of them (power) may give the impression of giving up the other (authority).

This creates a delicate situation to handle. One must assert some authority to preserve teaching effectiveness. However, if one invokes power and reverts to authoritarian measures to fend off the challenge, student-centredness loses its credibility. What has worked best for me so far has been ignoring the challenge and using cool-headed reasoning to deal with the *content* of such challenges. This means that the student's argument should be evaluated on its merit and may mean that the instructor accepts the student's point when it is a valid one. This way, one does not need to assert power, but may gain respect and authority by demonstrating one's intellectual abilities and fairness in dealing with students.[4] All in all, challenges to authority are reminders that in (academic) cultures where authority rests on power, understanding the difference between the two takes time. Providing a common space for cooperation is a first step, but students need to be socialised into the new learning environment. Additionally, such challenges imply that, in the East-Central European context, students wanting to give control back (Weimer 2002, 30) is only one issue flowing from the redistribution of power; they may also want to test whether they could seize control.

Student opinion

I used student opinion in order to evaluate the usefulness of the student-centred approach for student learning. I was primarily interested in

- whether students noticed the change, i.e. found the course different from the rest of their courses by a small or large degree;
- in what way they found the course different;
- whether they were generally satisfied with the course;

- whether they found it student-centred.

In order to answer these questions, during the last week of the teaching term, students were given the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire for extra credit points, if they were willing to share their name, or anonymously, otherwise. Most students elected to provide their names to receive extra credit, which might somewhat bias results toward more positive outcomes. When student filled out the questionnaire, they were aware of how the final grade was going to be calculated and knew the results of all components of their final grade except the one given for the final submission of their research projects. In other words, they had a clear idea of how well they had done in the class. While the fact that students did not have their final grades when filling out the survey may also bias results in favour of the experiment, this does not appear to be a substantial problem in light of students' written comments. Clearly, they were not afraid to criticise the course.

The survey was a modified, simplified, and supplemented version of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden 1991) that contained statements to be evaluated on a 5-point scale (strongly agree=5, agree=4, neutral/neither agree nor disagree=3, disagree=2, strongly disagree=1). Additionally, the questionnaire also contained demographic questions and open-ended questions regarding the teaching process. There were 59 students who were in a position to evaluate the course (i.e. attended enough classes to be able to form an opinion). They were divided into two sections, and several students were following an individual study plan, completing the course in an online format. The overall response rate was 86.44 per cent (see table 2).

Table 2. Response rate

	Section A	**Section B**	**Students on individual study plan**	**Total**
Survey respondents	20	24	7	51
Total number of students*	24	28	7	59

Response rate (%)	83.33	85.71	100.00	86.44

* The total number of students equals registered students minus students who did not attend enough classes to receive a grade and, therefore, were unlikely to be in a position to evaluate the course.

The CEQ questionnaire takes student-centred teaching and deep learning as the baseline for good teaching (Ramsden 1991). In this context, good teaching means engaging students, setting clear expectations at the beginning of the course; prescribing the appropriate amount of workload; providing feedback and using formative assessment; going beyond surface learning, i.e. aiming at understanding rather than only memorizing facts; skills development (argumentative and analytical skills in the current context); and providing support for students in their work (i.e. student experience). Table 3 contains the list of CEQ items used for this analysis, as well as the results of analysis.

I used one-sample t-tests (with an alpha level of .01), and tested observations against the hypothesis that, if the course was perceived as student-centred or students were satisfied with the course, they would agree with positive statements about student-centred teaching (i.e. H: mean>3). In four cases, when the questionnaire item was a negative statement, I reversed the scales for testing.

Table 3 reveals that student satisfaction was significantly higher than expected. Thirty-four of the 51 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the course was satisfying and only two students expressed dissatisfaction. Overall student satisfaction is only modestly related (.32) to the final grade.

All of the students found the course different from their Master's courses (13 slightly different; 38 very different). Comparing courses to their other graduate courses, students noted things that usually characterise the difference between student-and teacher-centredness. The most frequently mentioned theme (24 times) was the fact that the course required regular preparation, but many (10) praised the usefulness of the course for their future studies, interactivity (9), the practical nature of the course (4), and the importance of paying attention to detail and comprehension (3).

It is of some concern that 12 students noted – and not in a positive light – that the amount of work was overwhelming. This corresponds to my impressions and the findings on the relevant CEQ

item (#2), which was one of the two dimensions that did not show a statistically significant and positive result. The workload is a disputed issue and an ongoing dilemma that I have not been able to resolve so far. First, it is disputed, because while the students did seem overburdened, it is unclear if the workload was too high in absolute terms, or relative to their experience in other courses, as the workload is actually lighter than what I had experienced as a graduate student. Nonetheless, the dilemma remains: student-centredness inevitably results in less knowledge transmission. Teaching too many facts threatens to undermine achieving deep learning, which my students also found important, asking for more exercises to practice abstract concepts and various methods. Yet this necessitates further reduction in content, which, after earlier reductions, runs the risk of making the course incoherent and failing to meet departmental expectations of what students need to learn during the course. Introducing an undergraduate research methods course or running the course for two semesters (two solutions that were offered by students) appear appropriate to resolve this dilemma, but require changes to the curriculum and, as such, departmental involvement.

Evaluation of individual aspects of the course showed that students indeed found the course student-centred (see Table 3). Only one student explicitly wished to go back to subject-centred teaching, suggesting that I should use a 'kitchen funnel to pour knowledge into their heads.' Students gave particularly high scores for classroom interaction, instructor availability, clear expectations, and detailed and helpful feedback. These – together with written comments on appreciating feedback and the instructor's openness, helpfulness and general approach – indicate that students are grateful for the individual attention. Given the time and effort I invested into providing feedback to the 59 students in the course on smaller student exercises weekly, as well as on the cumulative assignment four times during the term, I found their high regard for feedback particularly rewarding. Unfortunately, high student numbers, especially in BA programs, and the legally mandated 20 hours to be devoted to teaching duties for full-time teaching faculty, question the viability of this approach in the Hungarian context in general (*Higher Education Law* 2011).

Students' evaluation of skills development was generally satisfactory: all related survey statements were significantly above the hypothesised mean of 3. However, student comments indicate that they were more preoccupied with an additional skill: reading comprehension. This was so either

because they found readings difficult and/or because they found that the course helped to develop their reading skills. This leads me to conclude that I might have overestimated my students' readings skills. Despite this, the findings here may not contradict my earlier assessment of student skills. Readings for this course were more complex than any prior readings students might have been confronted with before in the form of textbooks. In light of student complaints about the difficulty of the readings, it is not surprising that the course did not live up to student-centredness with regard to the questions I tended to ask in class. Students thought I asked too many questions about facts. Indeed, going through the readings to make sure students understood them before we could move on to more practical pursuits became part of the course. This was something I had not planned for, but turned out to be necessary and took up a lot of class time.

Table 3. One-sample, one-tailed t-tests for student-centredness as perceived by students (H_a: mean>3; with 99 per cent confidence level)

Questionnaire item	N	Mean	SD	t-score	SE
Overall satisfaction with the course					
Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this degree course	51	3.67	.71	6.69*	.10
Activating students					
The staff interacted a lot with us in the classroom	51	4.12	.68	11.69*	.10
The degree course is intellectually stimulating	51	3.21	.93	2.42*	.13
This course encouraged me to put a lot of effort into trying to understand things which initially seem difficult	51	3.72	.80	6.46*	.11
This course encouraged me to understand the material at hand in detail	51	3.42	.88	3.36*	.12
Giving appropriate workload					
I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn	51	2.94	.93	-.45	.13

Questionnaire item	N	Mean	SD	t-score	SE
Assessment					
†Feedback on my work is usually provided only in the form of marks and grades	51	3.67	1.05	4.53*	.15
†The staff seem more interested in testing what I have memorised than what I have understood	51	3.69	.76	6.44*	.11
†Too many staff ask me questions just about facts	51	2.98	.97	-.14	.14
The teaching staff normally give me helpful feedback on how I am going	51	4.06	.73	10.32*	. 10
The staff provides detailed feedback about my work	51	4.25	.72	12.50*	.10
†To do well in this degree all you really need is a good memory.	51	3.78	.99	5.68*	.14
Skills development					
†This course has helped me to develop my problem-solving skills	51	3.67	.85	3.14*	.18
This course has improved my written communication skills	51	3.33	.91	2.62*	.13
The degree course has helped sharpen my analytic skills	51	3.80	.90	7.17*	.11
This course has helped me develop my ability to work on my own	51	3.57	. 98	4.12*	.14
Support for students					
The teaching staff work hard to make their subjects interesting	51	3.90	.73	8.85*	.10
The staff was always available to answer questions about the course or material covered	51	4.49	.54	19.60*	.08
The staff made it clear right from the start what they expect from students.	51	4.31	.91	10.36*	.13

† Scales for these negative items were reversed before testing

Significance level: *<.01

Learning Outcomes

It only makes sense to use student-centred teaching if it is either superior to subject-centred teaching or effective in achieving learning outcomes. Given the sensitivity of comparing courses across instructors, this article lacks a quasi-experimental design. Nonetheless, it is still possible to evaluate teaching methods vis-à-vis learning outcomes.

On the final exam, while students did not perform very well on the lower order skill of memorizing facts, they performed above expectations on the second and third learning outcomes that involved higher order skills. The 20 multiple choice questions on the final exam were designed to evaluate the first learning outcome, that is, students' ability to (passively) 'list and define' concepts. The overall results on these items were lower than expected: in a system where a grade above 50 per cent is considered a passing grade, the class average was 63.64 percent with an SD of 2.46.Because student-centredness signifies movement away from memorisation, this finding is not unexpected and in some cases, as one student comment implies, low performance may be directly related to the change in the learning environment. Some students appeared to be unsure about how to study for the exam.

The second learning outcome expected students to perform two skills: to succinctly summarise their knowledge, as well as doing this in a comparative framework. As two short essay questions[4] from the final exam reveal, this learning outcome was clearly met, while the first question, which required students to present information in the same comparative framework as we discussed it in class, was slightly easier for students than the second, where students had to make the comparison by themselves. Altogether, problems relating to this skill were few in number. The most common mistake in the first exercise, made by 5 different students, was that students listed the differences as bullet points rather than in an essay format. This problem, however, did not appear to stem from issues with skills development: only one student had serious problems with comparing on the other

essay question as well. Nonetheless, this suggests that the way material is presented in class may create a cognitive barrier for some students for the learning and testing processes.

The number of skills-related problems increased on the more complex essay question, but only slightly. Seven students out of 49[5] failed to demonstrate their skill of comparison: they provided a description without explicit comparison. Other problems were quite rare: one student prescribed rather than described, another student overemphasised differences, and two students listed similarities instead of differences.

I measured students' ability to apply knowledge by assessing their final papers. Compared to the 2010 cohort of students, papers markedly improved. There was a clear move away from a historical approach toward methodologically-based political science writing. As a result, the worst student papers of the 2012 cohort resembled the average research proposal of the 2010 cohort. Furthermore, the more iterations students had the opportunity to make with regard to a task, the better that aspect of their writing was. The best part of their work was the research question, which they had four chances to revise on the basis of instructor feedback. The least sophisticated part of the research proposals was the identification of the limitations of research, which students saw examples of and were asked to discuss in class, but submitted for evaluation only once. Most students could clearly think in terms of variables, review and categorise the literature (although identifying gaps proved more difficult), find the right approach, and use questions or, more rarely, hypotheses to guide their research.

Some problems remain. Most importantly, there was often a lack of congruence among the elements of research design. For example, several students aimed at theory testing, but failed to identify a theory in their papers. Others detailed hypotheses for an exploratory case study. To some extent, this is natural: it takes time for the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place, which again suggests that more time should be allocated for research methods education. Surprisingly, students had a problem with explaining their method of case selection: they had not yet internalised—or simply overlooked—the necessity to select cases in harmony with the research design. They did not seem to understand that personal interest in a case alone was not a sufficient reason to research it.

Conclusion

Personal reflection, student opinion, and student work allow me to conclude that redesigning the course with a focus on the academic environment improved both the course and student learning. This underlines the importance of having a clear understanding of contextual features. I argued that this necessitates experiencing another – markedly different – educational setting. Thus, the institution of semester- or year-long early-career exchange programs between countries that have already embraced student-centred education and those that are yet to follow suit would be highly beneficial.

It is also important to stress that a commitment to student-centredness does not only mean the introduction of new teaching techniques, but primarily requires a comprehensive conceptual change about what teaching and learning entail. Exchange opportunities for professors could play a great role in fostering such change, as would instructional development programs later, when there is a departmental or broader institutional or systemic will for change. Such instructional development programs could help acquire related concepts, techniques, and skills. One of the most important skills is the ability to reflect on and research one's teaching. The inquiry into teaching and learning is particularly useful in diagnosing problems related to transferring student-centred practices into social, cultural, and educational contexts that are not based on the democratic principles behind student-centredness.

Nevertheless, reflectiveness does not solve every arising issue at once. Indeed, teaching should be viewed as an iterative process in which the continuous investigation of teaching and learning improves the process of education. This is also in harmony with Weimer's (2002, 29) advice about the gradual introduction of student-centredness.

Problems regarding skills development indicate that transferring student-centred practices into non-Western contexts may create issues that the current literature does not address. The consequences of employing a more equal distribution of power in East-Central Europe are a case in point. Besides students wishing to give control back to the instructor, a challenge to authority should also be expected. This foreshadows that the understanding and internalisation of behavioural patterns based on a more equal distribution of power in the classroom takes students (and potentially professors) longer than the current literature assumes.

This article also unearthed issues that cannot be resolved within the confines of one course. As unexpected problems with regard to reading comprehension reveal, there are simply too many skills that students should be taught during the methods course, because other courses do not focus on skills development. At the same time, the time allocated for methods teaching is very limited.

While I am grateful for my department because it allowed me to experiment with student-centred education, problems with skills development make it clear that individual efforts without more comprehensive and proactive commitment toward student-centredness at least at the departmental level has serious limitations. However, a general acceptance of student-centred teaching and learning methods across the higher education system is vital to change such contextual obstacles as student-faculty ratios or prescribed assessment methods. Short of a concerted effort toward student-centredness, students will return to their old learning habits without internalizing the new learning approach. Second, experience indicates that the extra effort students have to make for student-centred courses turns them away from attending the voluntary courses of the same instructor even when they acknowledge the benefits of student-centredness. They can simply earn the necessary credits in a much easier way.

Admittedly, current austerity measures and already unfavourable student-faculty ratios do not make a comprehensive adaptation of student-centredness in post-Communist states realistic in the short term. Nonetheless, limited moves in this direction are possible in Master's programs that have fewer students and through a better allocation of course credits and credit hours.

Notes

1. The website of the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference (www.apsanet.org) and the Methods page of the International Political Education Database (https://sites.google.com/site/psatlg/Home/resources/journal-articles/methods) are great resources on teaching research methods.

2. As of 2013, 9 universities offer BA programs in Political Science (called Politology), and 17 universities or colleges offer BA programs in International Relations (IR). Political Science and

International Relations MA programs are available at seven and thirteen universities, respectively (Felvi.hu 2012).

3. Piloting the redesigned course in Autumn 2011 led to further reduction in course content.

4. Ironically, I have found that deferring to students when they were right and owning up a mistake when I made one have served me best in gaining respect and strengthening my authority.

5. 'Describe the general methodological differences and perspectives between political science/IR and history,' and 'Describe the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups in comparison to those of interviews.'

5. Three students did not write the exam, and answers from students on individual study plan were not considered, as essay questions were different for them.

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