

XUAN ZHAO

Statement of Teaching

A group of thirty people, with a wide range of ages and skin colors, mill around in the center of a big meeting room with all the chairs pushed up against the walls. “*What is one thing that you ate for dinner last night?*” The woman standing in the middle asks. The crowd giggles a bit before taking turns to respond: “Rice!” “Deep-dish pizza!” “Chocolate ice cream!” As the room quiets down, the facilitator moves on to the next prompt. “*What is a tradition that your family has on a holiday?*” The crowd buzzes again. “*When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?*” She continues. “*And the last one: What was your grandfather’s occupation?*”

This scene captures people’s first taste of a two-hour workshop, “*Inclusion in Practice: Offering and Appreciating Our Differences*,” a workshop my colleagues and I have designed to cultivate the behavioral insights and interpersonal skills needed to discuss conflicting views and interpersonal disagreement. Over the past two years, I have designed a variety of experiential learning exercises similar to this one in an innovative collaboration between the Center for Decision Research (CDR) at Chicago Booth and The Second City, the world-renowned comedy theater and school of improvisation. Grounded in cutting-edge behavioral research and using interactive improv games as a vehicle, our workshops are packed with laughter, engaging conversations, and moments of self-reflection and intellectual growth. These workshops have been rolled out to various groups on the University of Chicago campus through the Diversity and Inclusion Initiative and corporate teams through Executive Education programs at Booth, and they have been met with enthusiastic reactions because of the unique interactive format and rigorous academic content.

As a budding teacher, I feel incredibly lucky to have been hired by the CDR to work on this unique collaboration and to have achieved such an impact. Designing and delivering these workshops to a variety of audiences has offered me numerous opportunities to learn how to craft engaging classroom materials, connect with a room full of different perspectives, and make people in group settings feel heard and engaged. As I repeatedly see people’s eyes widen upon hearing that my postdoc position entails working with The Second City, I come to realize how surreal such an opportunity truly is. Yet to me it is also fundamentally consistent with my ideals of learning and years of teaching experiences.

The Spirit of Learning

I believe learning is fun, exciting, and rewarding. The most effective learning experience, in my opinion, has four pillars: *real-world problems, rigorous academic content, first-hand experiences, and critical reflections with peers*. Therefore, students in my class should not only gain knowledge and practical skills, but also an ability to identify opportunities to apply learning to the real world. Through this process, students will also gain deeper insights into their own interests and passions, which can motivate them to continue self-guided learning long after graduating from my class.

The ability to conduct self-guided learning is especially critical to this generation of students. The rapid pace of technological advancement constantly poses new sets of challenges that go far beyond the issues scholars and practitioners have encountered in the past. And for many problems, we do not have established theories, methods, or tools to solve them. As I expect my students to take on leading roles in various segments of our society, it is critical for them to learn how to effectively guide their own learning and solve unprecedented issues based on existing knowledge, skills, and resources. To inspire them to become self-guided life-long learners, my teaching focuses on project-based learning, an interactive learning environment, and multi-disciplinary teamwork.

My Teaching Approach: “Leading with Empathy” as an Example

In the Summers of 2015, 2016, and 2017, I implemented my ideals of teaching and learning in a course I independently developed and taught at the Brown Leadership Institute, “*Leading with Empathy in the 21st Century*.” It was a new course offered through the School of Professional Studies. Although it was a Pre-College course for advanced high school students who studied at Brown University over summer breaks, the inspirations for my class came from materials and activities I accumulated from various undergraduate and MBA classes I had worked for as a teaching assistant—most notably Deborah Gruenfeld’s “*Acting with Power*,” a highly successful MBA class at the Stanford Graduate School of Business that innovatively combined behavioral science lectures with improv and acting exercises.

Each summer, students from all over the world came to my class and spent 40 hours studying the science of empathy and how to cultivate empathy in themselves and in our interdependent society. My course consisted of three major components. The first one was academics: Students learned important concepts, theories, and research paradigms on empathy and leadership from social psychology and social neuroscience. Because no similar courses have been offered anywhere, the lack of templates and precedents provided me an ideal opportunity to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines. I compiled a reading list ranging from recent journal articles and book chapters to online debates among renowned scholars. I also employed games, demonstrations, simulations, pair shares, and small group discussions to create inclusive and interactive learning experiences.

The second component was a series of workshops on “how to step into another person’s shoes,” where students examined various methods to cultivate empathy in life. For example, after reading a book chapter on how mental simulation connected people from diverse backgrounds, students worked in small groups to conceptually develop an “Empathy Museum,” where technology and media were used creatively and interactively to help museum visitors simulate different people’s life experiences. The museum exhibits student teams proposed include: a role-playing video game (RPG) in which players control the action of a first-generation college student to navigate her college life; a “life simulation room” where people experience social scenarios varying from being bullied to being unconditionally accepted in an immersive display system; a “tech-free zone” where people put screens aside and play improv games together, and so on. Even though we did not have the time and resources to implement these proposals, students found the design process highly inspiring, as it encouraged them to embrace their creativity and identify their own passions. Moreover, I invited guest speakers from Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard Kennedy School, and the Symbolic Systems program at Stanford to share their first-hand experiences as practitioners to facilitate vicarious learning.

The final component was the “Action Plan,” where students designed their capstone projects to apply the knowledge and skills of empathy and leadership in their home communities. This project-based learning approach trained students to collect information over a very short period of time and provided an opportunity to incorporate their unique backgrounds, talents, and interests into our learning community. I noticed that students were highly motivated by their peers’ projects and became even more engaged in the classroom after discussing ideas with each other.

Assessing students’ learning progress and my effectiveness in teaching is critical. Depending on the situation and purpose, I like to use a variety of assessment methods to assess student learning. Because formal tests and quizzes was discouraged due to school policy, I embraced other data-driven assignments: I assigned students oral presentations and provided objective grading rubrics for clear and accurate evaluation; I regularly checked in with students with formal feedback forms as well as informal meetings; I also assigned students short essays to reflect on their personal development and their learning experiences and provided feedback.

All the hard work in designing and teaching this new course led me to the 2015 Archambault Award for Teaching Excellence at Brown University (honorable mention for teaching with distinction; the Pre-College program houses over 300 courses and honors one first prize and one honorable mention each year), where the award committee announced:

“Her efforts resulted in a course that pushed students to think beyond themselves, learn what it means to be empathetic, how this is coupled with effective and valuable leadership and visualize themselves on the path to being leaders in their local community, region and indeed, one day, the world.”

My course evaluations were also highly positive. For example, my students reported that “the instructor was consistently well prepared” (4.9/5.0), “the instructor kept me interested in this course” (4.7/5.0), “the Instructor was respectful, friendly and approachable” (5.0/5.0), “I found the course intellectually engaging” (4.7/5.0), “the goals and objectives of this course were clear” (4.7/5.0), and that “the course materials (readings, lectures, and course packs) were helpful” (4.8/5.0).

Finally, what really touched me was the overwhelming number of thank-you letters I received after my course, in which students told me that they gained new knowledge and were determined to continue learning in related topics. For example, one student wrote, *“Xuan, I honestly don’t think I can truly express my gratitude and appreciation of these past two weeks with just a letter. You are such an awesome teacher, and you have been a huge role model for me and will continue to be. I am so, so happy I took your class, and I have learned more than I thought was possible about myself, humans, and the world.”* And another student even commented, *“Thank you for one of the best two weeks of my life! In this case, I didn’t even mind going to school!”*

To share my course with other teachers and the general public, I have created a website that includes the syllabus, reading list, visual materials (e.g., videos), assignments, improv-based class exercises, and more student reviews, available at: www.leading-with-empathy.com.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Teaching did not come naturally to me. My philosophy in teaching and learning has developed through working with great teachers in social psychology, organizational behavior, anthropology, and acting. For instance, to craft the art of teaching and public speaking, I took a year-long training program at Brown Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, where I attended lectures and workshops on learning styles, course design, grading and assessment, inclusion and diversity, and effective public speaking and classroom behavior. After that, I served as a teaching assistant for a total of eight undergraduate and MBA courses. To overcome the barrier of not being a native English speaker, I took two acting courses and one public speaking course in the Department of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown. And finally, I used opportunities to speak as a guest lecturer at various classes and present at over a dozen of international academic conferences to hone my speaking skills. My presentation at *“Research Matters!”*, a TED-style event at Brown University, showcases my public speaking skills and is available on Youtube ([link](#)).

Ultimately, my diverse teaching experiences—designing and facilitating workshops with improv teachers from The Second City, developing and teaching my own course on empathy and leadership, apprenticing in eight classrooms, and taking acting and public speaking classes—have prepared me to embrace my role as a teacher who emphasizes academic rigor, creativity, inclusive class environment, and real-world relevance.