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# VIADUCT Teaching Paper

## Applying Learner-Centered Approach to Teaching Turkey – European Union Relations

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## ABSTRACT

The paper introduces a model of learner-centered approach to teaching Turkey EU relations by drawing on the example of PSIR 433 Turkey-EU relations class that is taught to fourth-year students at Yeditepe University, Political Science and International Relations Department. The course is designed to encourage the students to become active participants in learning through four major pillars: pre-lecture discussion sessions, analysis of primary documents, in-class simulation exercise and a research paper. In this way, the course enables the students to take on extended responsibility in learning and equip them with analytical and academic skills to assess Turkey-EU relations.

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## Introduction

In the last few decades, considerable research has elaborated on the constructivist approach to learning, leading to a paradigm shift from teacher-based towards a more learner-centred approach (LCA) in higher education (Zophy 1982; Meece, Herman, and McCombs 2003; McCombs and Whister 1997; Weimer 2002; Blumberg and Weimer 2012; Doyle 2011; Pillay 2002). The LCA changed the traditional roles in a classroom as instructors “are no longer the sole determinants of the learning process” but they share this role with students who take on increased responsibility in learning and thusly become active participants (Lone and Burroughs 2016, 33). The instructor thus assumes the role of guiding and facilitating learning processes according to the individual needs of students. Notwithstanding the vast academic literature on the benefits of addressing individual learners’ needs through LCA, the research suggests that in practice teacher-centred style of learning still dominates universities, pointing to a discrepancy between theory and practice (Liu, Qiao, and Liu 2006). This article aims to provide the literature with an example of applied LCA to teaching Turkey-European Union (EU) relations by drawing upon the experiences from “PSIR 433 Turkey-EU relations” course at Political Science and International Relations department at Yeditepe University, İstanbul. An account of the learning tools that are embedded in the course and how these tools address the objectives of LCA will be elaborated on and substantiated with relevant student evaluations.

PSIR 433 is an elective course open to enrolment of fourth-year Political Science and International Relations students as well as any interested student from other departments. The undergraduate curriculum of Political Science and International Relations department contains a third-year compulsory course on EU institutions and policies. The majority of students taking the class already have a background information on what the EU is and how it works. This enables the elective course to specialize further on the EU’s relations with Turkey by in line with the LCA that shifts the focus from the instructor to learners by applying methods that would develop academic, creative and critical skills of students. Two major objectives of the course are to challenge students’ preconceptions of Turkey-EU relations with an academic approach and to equip students with analytical and academic skills to assess the relations. In so doing, the content of the course is used first to build a knowledge base and secondly to foster learning skills in a way to promote self-awareness and confidence in students’ ability to tackle learning tasks (Weimer 2002, 51). To reach these goals, course requirements are set in line with a deep approach to learning. That is, students are encouraged “to use the most appropriate cognitive activities for” learning (Biggs and Tang 2011, 26) via four major learning tools: pre-lecture discussion sessions, analysing the primary sources, in-class simulation exercises and individual research papers. The

tools are introduced in a constructive classroom climate in which students are motivated to take up more responsibility for learning.

The long-standing Turkey-EU relations, mainly due to the complicated nature of the enlargement process, have resulted in crystallization of particular views among the Turkish public opinion about the EU in general and about the state of Turkey's relations with the EU in specific. A 2016 poll reveals that while 75% of the respondents support Turkey's membership to EU, only 35% expect Turkey to become a member of the Union in the next five years. Despite the clear position about the status of Turkey-EU relations, 85% of the respondents declared that they have 'none' or 'little' knowledge of the EU (Economic Development Foundation 2016). The data thus suggest that a significant majority of the Turkish public holds a perception of Turkey-EU relations despite the lack of information about the content of the EU. The low level of information on what the EU can be regarded as an indicator of the low level of information on Turkey-EU relations, as the sui generis nature of the EU is essential to understand its relations with Turkey. This situation is not significantly different with students of Political Science and International Relations despite their background information on the EU. According to a survey that I conduct at the beginning of the semester with the 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate students taking Turkey-EU relations class, 40% of students evaluate their level of information on Turkey EU relations as less than moderate while none of them perceives themselves as well-informed about the relations. The course content thus seeks to challenge the student's preconceptions by equipping them with the tools that are needed to make an analysis of the relations in an informed manner. For this purpose, the syllabus is designed in two parts: The first weeks are devoted to critically assess Turkey's accession process to the EU in context: that is, not by solely focusing on the bilateral relations but also by considering the relations parallel to the evolution of the EU, the developments in Turkey and in the world in relation to historical context. The second part of the syllabus focuses on exploring the policy areas in which Turkey's and EU's interests converge. In this way, the course shifts to evaluate the multidimensional aspects of relations, emphasizing that the relations are not restricted to accession path but rather there is substantial partnership going on between the two parties including energy, trade and immigration policies.

## **The learning tools**

### **1.1. Pre-lecture learner-centered discussion sessions**

Each week starts with a discussion session led by a teaching assistant (TA) in the presence of the instructor. Students, TA and the instructor sit in a circle and the TA starts the discussion with an introductory, open-ended question. The discussion then develops under the TA's leadership as students continue the conversation by raising their arguments and questions and also by encouraging each

other to support their arguments with textual evidence. The instructor contributes to these discussions as a “senior partner” with the purpose of destabilizing the traditional teacher-student dyad of teacher-centred classrooms (Zophy 1982, 186). In such a setting, students feel like they are organic parts of the classroom and feel more confident to participate in the learning process. As such, they do not only develop their own learning skills but also contribute to each other’s learning processes. In the words of a student:

*Personally, I find the discussions at the beginning of lectures very beneficial. It makes me feel like we are working as a team to tackle the contents of the class rather than struggling alone.*

Having the discussion session before the lecture has three important advantages: Firstly, giving the floor to students before the instructor allows the discussion to be driven by arguments genuinely developed by students rather than students discussing with the arguments derived from the instructor’s lecture. Participating in the pre-lecture discussion in an informed manner requires students come to class well-prepared to defend their arguments. Their preparation phase is guided by discussion questions which are sent to students via email one week before the class and provide them with a framework to elaborate on the week’s readings. In line with the questions, students are required to write short response papers on the assigned readings. The response papers are intended to facilitate their assessment of academic articles in a structural manner. In addition to the response papers, students are invited to bring in news articles on the week’s theme to class. In this way, they conduct an independent research through the newspapers to find an interesting article related to the academic material. The exercise provides them with the opportunity to link the academic information with practical, factual content. By incorporating the news articles into the sessions it is possible to enrich the academic discussions with current developments. Discussing academic articles together with news coverage is also useful for developing critical reading skills among students. During the discussion, students sometimes criticize the news coverage with the academic information they obtain from the readings, sometimes use the news article to substantiate the academic discussion, and sometimes to test the academic propositions of the readings with the current developments between Turkey and the EU. Further, the weekly research stimulates interests among students about the recent developments in the EU.

Secondly, pre-lecture discussions put students at the centre of the course and move them from passive-learner status. The discussion participation reveals students’ strong and weak points in understanding the week’s theme so that the lecture can elaborate more on their weaknesses rather than delivering a strictly pre-structured package of straightforward information. The following lecture is thus shaped according to students’ needs, by responding to the questions students pose during the discussion session and linking their arguments to the academic debates and theoretical approaches.

Lastly, preparing for active participation in discussions rather than for listening to instructor-based lectures gives a more concrete incentive for learning as students know how they can use the information. LCA emphasizes the importance of understanding how the learning experience will serve the learner (Pillay 2002, 95); a premise which is fulfilled by pre-lecture discussions. As one student states:

*I find it very pleasant to share my opinions about the articles or listen to other opinions. I think doing this at the beginning of the class works as an ice-breaker and also motivates me to listen to the class more eagerly so that I can improve my arguments in the next discussion.*

In this sense, the students become more willing and thus more receptive to learning. Once knowing how the learning experience can be useful to them, students gain self-confidence in contributing to an interactive learning process.

*These discussions help us be more productive and confident in the topics. As without these discussions, I believe most of us wouldn't be so interactive in this course.*

## **1.2. Analysing primary sources**

Discussions are followed by a lecture through which the instructor contributes to the knowledge base by linking the pre-lecture discussion to the theoretical approaches and factual data. Rather than summarizing the week's assigned readings, the instructor introduces excerpts from relevant primary sources to support each week's theme. For instance, while Turkey's accession process is evaluated parallel to the EU's changing enlargement strategy, in comparison to other candidates' accession processes, the Negotiating Framework of Turkey is introduced together with the Negotiating Framework of Croatia; the two documents that were signed on the same day. Such comparisons enable students to assess the coherence of the EU's approach towards the candidates and evaluate Turkey-EU relations on a more legitimate basis and develop their analytical skills.

Incorporating primary sources into the lectures serves to unravel the established myths in Turkey-EU relations; such as Turkey waiting for membership at the EU's door since 1958 although, in reality, Turkey started to seek membership with the 1987 official application. Further, the official language used in primary documents is instructive for students in terms of how diplomacy is conducted. As one student puts it,

*Using primary documents rather than secondary ones has improved my understanding of EU and its policies a lot because I could see the language they used and their choice of words. This helped me to see how much is actually said and how much scholars infer from them.*

### 1.3. In-class Simulation Exercise

One of the main evaluation tools of the course is a two-staged in-class simulation exercise in which students actively engage in role-playing of an EU decision making processes with regard to Turkey. Simulation is an asynchronous physical learning tool (Singh 2003) that brings together knowledge and theory component with a practical component of Turkey-EU relations. The simulation participation enables students to reflect what they have learned in class in a real-world scenario. Students are expected to think and act like the country that they are assigned to, and in this way, are prompted to assess Turkey's relations with the EU from a different perspective than that of their own. One student explains how playing the role of the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk changed her pre-conceptions of Turkey-EU relations as follows:

*Due to our long process of accession to the EU, we have been learning and hearing about Turkey-EU relations since we are children. However, before this class and simulation, I have never put myself in the shoes of EU countries and the European Council President and analyze their thinking and decisions. In my opinion, understanding the other side and making empathy is very important in communication.*

The Spring 2016 class simulated the European Council voting for Turkey's entry to the Union. The Spring 2018 class is simulating a decision-making process in the European Council on the opening of Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. The 2011 Enlargement Strategy set Chapter 23 to be among the first to be opened and the last to be closed, however, in the case of Turkey, the chapter cannot be opened due to Republic of Cyprus veto. Thus, the topic brings together the discussions on democracy; which is one of the issues at the core of Turkey's official accession negotiation process and political consideration of member states in such a way to provide students with a ground for experiencing major problems in Turkey's accession.

Simulations are conducted at two stages. At the first stage, students are expected to come to class with a negotiation position brief, in which they provide specific information on the strategy that their "countries" will pursue during the simulation. The task of preparing a negotiation position brief is intended to guide their pre-simulation study phase. In the brief, they explain their key and additional objectives, the things they cannot agree to, the other country/ies they are planning to approach for support as well as the country/ies that can potentially block them achieving their objectives, and their overall strategy to deal with opposition. Once the simulation starts, the representatives are asked by the instructor to read their initial positions on the topic, in an alphabetical order. Once each negotiation position is stated, the floor is given to representatives to meet, negotiate, strike deals and debate in a non-structured atmosphere. If need be, the non-structured negotiations are facilitated by the TA and the instructor. They try to form alliances for their positions, convince the opposition and/or mediate between different parties for a common decision. At the end of the first session, students are given



the task of preparing a follow-up brief in which they briefly describe their position during the first round of negotiations, the challenges and/or opportunities they encountered, whether or not they need to revise strategy and their main objectives for the second round. Simulation exercises can be successful learning tools to 'divorce students' idealism from the complexities of real-life political conflicts' (Hatipoglu, Müftüler-Baç, and Murphy 2014, 395; Youde 2008). The follow-up brief serves this purpose by providing students with an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their initial strategy by comparing it to their revised strategy.

The second stage of simulation starts with the countries briefly presenting their revised positions. Then a more structured pre-voting discussion takes place in which the countries sit around the table and respond to each other when the instructor gives them the right to speak. The simulation is concluded with a voting session. The simulations are unique tools for students to experience the practical functioning of Turkey-EU relations by distancing them from their personal perspectives. The two-stage setup of the simulations facilitates their engagement with their roles and help them to develop a multi-dimensional perspective on Turkey-EU relations. One student describes her perception of how simulation exercise contributed to students as follows:

*The achievements were so unique that the students were able to make relevant comments regarding their country profiles. To illustrate, while Cyprus and Austria were making negative comments, Germany became the mediator to this critic issue. By this way, students developed their abilities to think from multi-perspectives. Hence, those simulations provided an interactive way of learning while it was enhancing the characteristic of students as team players.*

Such multi-dimensional approach is crucial in developing one's own analytical perspective on Turkey-EU relations.

*As a student, who had benefitted from European Union in-class simulations, I would like to say, today I can make clear statements about Turkish integration in European Union thanks to those activities.*

Students' engagement with the decision-making process in the EU is also helpful in terms of stimulating interest and thusly facilitating their understanding of how the EU works.

*The simulation attracted my attention to a subject which is in my opinion quite straightforward and plain for many students. Rather than sitting and memorizing the roles and procedures of the EU, the simulation made me understand how institutions interact and make decisions by helping me become a part of a "miniature" EU in our class. The least I can say is that it gave me a clearer picture of how things work in the EU and sparked my interest to study EU politics and institutions in further detail.*

#### 1.4. Research Paper

Lastly, students are required to write an individual research paper on a topic they choose on Turkey-EU relations. Students are encouraged to formulate a research question with a clear methodology so that they will collect their data and make a genuine analysis. Writing of a research paper by drawing on data analyzing can be an intimidating task for the undergraduate student this is why two support mechanisms are introduced to their research processes; namely, the post-lecture discussion in which they receive instructor and peer feedback and assigned writing coaches. The week before the submission of the research questions, a post-lecture discussion session is held in which the students receive feedback from the instructor and exchange views with their peers on how to design their research. Traditionally, students formulate their research questions and choose their methodologies by consulting their instructors individually. Bringing a collective approach to constructing individual research papers enables students to benefit from the instructor feedbacks given to other students, to inspire research ideas among their peers, and learn from each other; and further accomplishes the LCA goal of making students active at all stages of learning. During the semester, two more post-lecture discussion sessions are held to discuss students' progress in their research. Students share their achievements as well as difficulties they go through in their research. In this way, a dynamic research group is established through which students exchange ideas and improve their research skills by learning from their peers' experiences. Further support is provided to students in the process of writing their papers as two TA's are available as "writing coaches" to guide students in tackling structural and technical complications. Also, a writing center is available for students' inquiries about references and format of essays.

The course is concluded with a final panel discussion in which each student has 10-15 minutes to present their research and lead the following discussion. The concluding remarks of the semester are thusly made in the panel discussion in which the students are encouraged to evaluate the course, their own progress as well as each other's research.

*Prior to the class, I did not have a strong methodological background in research. It was a challenging task for me but in the end, tracing and analyzing the e-archives helped me to experience a small part of how qualitative research is being done. With this research assignment incorporated in the class increased my interest in academic research and methods.*

## Conclusion

The learning tools that are incorporated in PSIR 433 Turkey-EU Relations favor an approach which put the students at the center of learning activities by giving them extended responsibility in learning. Applying LCA to teaching Turkey-EU relations has a strikingly positive impact on students' engagement with the subject for two basic reasons. First and foremost, students enjoy the learning process and they become the main determinants of their own learning process; a skill they would carry beyond the classroom. Thus, the learning tools used for this course help to operationalize the idea that "learning is not just a one-time event" but "a continuous process" (Singh 2003). Following an approach in which the teaching is not only about facts, concepts and principles facilitates the building of an analytical understanding of different dynamics underpinning the relations. In the words of one student:

*I expected only to have a historical description of Turkey-EU relations and definitely got more than I expected. This class has helped me to improve my understanding of not only EU and Turkey but also the decision-making mechanisms in individual and state levels from material and normative perspectives.*

In this sense, any preconceptions that students have prior to taking the class are challenged by the academic approach and replaced by an analytical understanding. The LCA methods which upgrade students' status from passive receivers to active participants facilitate their learning processes and can be very effective mechanisms to understand complex issues. Student evaluations reveal that students are aware of the difference that the LCA creates on their learning processes:

*Rather than having the environment where the teacher only talks and students listen (what we generally had throughout the bachelor) these methods encouraged (or forced in a positive way) me to engage with the topic directly, be more attentive during class activities and understand complex processes more clearly (especially when we think of decision-making process in the EU).*

Secondly, actively participating in the course stimulate students' interests in following Turkey-EU relations not only academically but also in their daily lives:

*I had little interest in EU - Turkey Relations. (...) I have started to enjoy reading articles about EU. I have started to follow News alike.*

The experience suggests that the stimulated interest in Turkey-EU relations has an impact on shaping students' future careers. Five out of seventeen students enrolled in the Spring 2016 class continued their graduate studies in a European Studies programmes. The knowledge base and the learning skills they acquire in this class equip students with the necessary abilities required to pursue a career related to the EU. In the words of one graduate student:

*I study in Brussels now for my Master and I can say that almost every program or job in Brussels was somehow related to the EU, so you are already expected to know something about the EU.*

*In this case, PSIR 433 was a really useful course for me to understand the EU master classes and to follow the current debates live at the heart of the EU. I also use my EU knowledge at my internships in Brussels, especially while I was working on the EU projects and EU lobbying.*

Last but not the least, as the instructor of the course and as an academician working on Turkey-EU relations, applying LCA to teach Turkey-EU relations tremendously contributes to my lecturing and researching skills. At the outset, the dynamic classroom climate makes me more attentive to students' needs and guides me on the development of my teaching techniques. But more importantly, the course gives me the chance to learn from and to be challenged by "my junior partners." Their continuous inspiration motivates me with further research ideas and provides me with new perspectives to re-evaluate what I have learned so far.

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# ABOUT VIADUCT

The **historical complexity and volatility of EU-Turkey relations** are reflected by **research and teaching** in this field. There are international research projects as well as many smaller and nationally funded studies and projects dealing with Turkey, including its relationship with the EU. Linking these different projects, diffusing knowledge on the European Integration process and exploiting synergies between international players constitutes real added-value for European Integration studies.

To this end, VIADUCT builds a large network with **40 partner institutions** and one extended network partner from **36 countries**. **Represented in every EU member state, Turkey and the neighbourhood**, VIADUCT is extending its outreach in research and teaching beyond the EU.

The Challenge faced by the VIADUCT Partners are the **EU Turkey relations as a moving target**. On the one hand Turkey is seen as a “key strategic partner for the EU”, on the other hand several interconnected crises are profoundly affecting EU–Turkey relations. VIADUCT’s objective is, hence, to **promote research, teaching and policy dialogue on EU-Turkey relations**.

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