

# Using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a Pedagogical Tool to Address Global Health Inequalities

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## Abstract

The phrase, “think globally, act locally”, advocates for individuals to act in their

immediate environment in an effort to address larger worldwide health concerns. Educating university students as global citizens requires faculty to engage them in meaningful course content and the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be one such avenue. As pedagogy, SDG 4 (quality education) encourages action-oriented learning environments. As course content, the scope and integrated nature of the 17 SDGs offers instructors flexibility in creating assignments that address the planet’s most urgent economic, social, and environmental crises. I introduce two projects (Global Changemakers and #JoinTogether UHart) that ask first-year students to critically think about global health issues, particularly women’s health, while advocating at a local level. I also share my experience with using a student preceptor who helped facilitate the class. Students had high enthusiasm for the subject, reported being provided with useful information and skills, and some sought out academic and non-academic opportunities related to course after it ended. These outcomes indicate that the SDGs may be an effective pedagogical tool to engage future interest in gender, health, and other systemic inequities thereby moving the UN’s SDG agenda forward.

*Keywords:* United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, SDG, women’s health, health inequities, pedagogy, advocacy, gender equality, teaching, preceptor, #JoinTogether

## Using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a Pedagogical Tool to Address Global Health Inequalities

In 2015, the United Nations Member States adopted 17 integrated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) meant to address global economic, social, and environmental sustainable development. They hoped these goals would be achieved by 2030 (UN, 2015). However, action to meet the goals were slow; the associated 169 targets and 232 indicators of the SDGs can be tracked online (Ritchie et al., 2018). In September, 2019 the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, summoned for a “decade of action” calling on three segments of society to move the SDGs forward—global action, local action, and people action. In regard to people action, Guterres stated “I am calling on civil society, grassroot organizations, media, private sector, unions, *academia* [emphasis added] and others to mobilize partnerships like never before” (Guterres, 2019).

It is vital for educators to engage students in knowledge of and avenues *by which* the SDGs move forward. The United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) leads the efforts for quality education (SDG 4) and calls for innovative pedagogy. Transformative education is

interdisciplinary, requires learner-centered approaches, collaborative decision-making, critical and systemic thinking, problem-solving, and is action-oriented (Leicht et al., 2018). Quality education (SDG 4) demands that instructors engage students in understanding inequities from a systemic perspective rather than simply teaching them to be “personally responsible citizens” (Westheimer, 2020).

One way that civil society, including academia, can be involved with the UN is through the Department of Global Communications (DGC) (formerly the Department of Public Information; DPI). As a newly appointed UN representative for the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP), I attended the 67th UN/DPI conference, “We the Peoples: Together Finding Global Solutions for Global Problems”, in August, 2018. I met a team from De Montfort University (DMU) who presented their work on the creation and execution of #JoinTogether, a network of universities using the SDGs to educate and address inequalities. DMU’s Vice-Chancellor “challenged universities to be less talk and more action” (UN/DPI and NGO/DPI Executive Committee, 2018, p. 50). Inspired, I joined this network and created #JoinTogether UHart, a project on women’s health.

The phrase, “think globally, act locally”, advocates for individuals to act in their immediate environment in an effort to address larger global health concerns. Addressing structural change is not easy but acting on problems in their own lives can be a step toward empowering students toward this larger goal. As stated by Leite (2021), “it is our students who will determine the post-2030 global agenda – so why not bring them into the debate now?” (p. 7). Guided by SDG 4 (quality education), I wanted to create a learner-centered environment, in my first-year seminar that focused on women’s bodies (“Beauty, Body Image, and Feminism”) where students were involved as active co-collaborators rather than passive listeners. SDG 5 (gender equality) was the predominant focus of

the course, as Horton (2015) suggests it is often overlooked by those seeking to address SDG 3 (good health and well-being). Using the SDGs as a framework, I designed two projects (Global Changemakers and #JoinTogether UHart) for my students to address global women’s health issues while advocating locally.

## First-Year Seminars (FYS)

First-year seminars (FYS) are low-enrollment, introductory level, seminars designed to help students become comfortable with academic culture and often include how to improve writing, analytic, and speaking skills (Mamrick, 2005). At my institution, FYS instructors are also asked to identify a real-world problem and create a collaborative project to address it. Addressing a problem implies advocacy but is not generally a goal of FYS courses. However, SDG 4 (quality education) calls for action-oriented efforts and is well-suited to engage students in a dynamic way.

My FYS focused on the ways in which women’s bodies are socially constructed and viewed; we paid particular attention to patriarchy as a social structure that shapes these constructions and feminist theories that help deconstruct them. We also examined consequences on an individual (e.g., body image dissatisfaction, health) and structural level (e.g., gender-based violence, sex trafficking). The college offers approximately 25 different FYS from which incoming students can choose. My FYS primarily draws women who are Psychology, Biology, and Communication majors; 16 women enrolled in the section.

FYS courses often utilize a student preceptor (similar to a teaching assistant). Preceptors are commonly found in nursing environments where experienced nurses (preceptors) are paired with novice nurses to help with critical thinking, clinical decision-making, and the transference of knowledge and skills in a clinical setting

(Freiburger, 2002). Student preceptors are advanced, academically successful undergraduates, chosen by the instructor, who use their skills to both model successful academic behaviors (e.g., how to engage in seminar discussions) and guide students who might need additional help (e.g., serve as a writing coach). Being a preceptor provides talented students a unique leadership opportunity in working closely with a faculty member in teaching and mentoring. It has been shown that FYS courses utilizing preceptors had greater student engagement than those without one (Black & Voelker, 2008). My preceptor had taken the same FYS the year prior and was familiar with my teaching style; however, the SDG-related content was new. Given the all-female makeup of the class, it is worth noting that the preceptor was male. Since systemic issues of power were part of the course, we acknowledged the ways this gender dynamic might shape the class process (e.g., female students might not want to share certain personal stories). We also noted that using his male privilege to advocate for gender and other inequities was a significant message. He attended each class, was available to help students improve their writing, modeled how to connect personal anecdotes to course content, how to ask good questions, and co-lead a discussion. We had weekly meetings to debrief his role as a preceptor, navigate student concerns, and organize the SDG-related course content.

## SDG-Related Course Content

### Global Changemakers

I created the Global Changemaker assignment to bring awareness to women's roles as global advocates, familiarize students with the SDGs, and encourage critical thinking regarding the

intersections between the goals. The students and preceptor randomly chose one of 16 SDGs to study which became their SDG for the semester; SDG 5 (gender equality) was purposefully left out. This weekly assignment entailed an oral presentation regarding a woman previously unknown to them, outside the United States, whose work addressed their SDG. They were also required to provide thoughts on how their SDG intersected with gender equality (SDG 5), as it was the course's main focus. The preceptor presented first providing a model for students to follow. To encourage critical and systemic thinking, the preceptor and I facilitated discussion that modeled intellectual curiosity by asking questions that placed the issues in their larger social, political, or economic context. Over time, students' presentations and comments became more sophisticated in placing responsibility for change within systems rather than individuals.

### #JoinTogether UHart

The collaborative class project was part of the larger #JoinTogether UN network (<https://unisjointogether.com/>) providing students with a sense of ownership in being connected to global partners. Students were asked to think about an issue facing the planet related to their SDG ("think globally") that we could address on campus ("act locally"); that issue had to be tied to gender equality (SDG 5). They listened to each other's ideas, viewpoints, and collectively decided on two issues related to women's health—sexual assault/violence and the availability of sanitary products. The preceptor and I acted as facilitators so as not to interject our own ideas regarding pressing issues that were important to the students. #JoinTogether UHart had three goals: distribute and analyze a survey on the two issues; create an awareness campaign; and fundraise for organizations addressing sexual violence and menstrual products for those in need.

How would we meet these goals? With guidance from the preceptor and me, the class created five teams: 1) research/education; 2) fundraising; 3) artistic; 4) community connections; and 5) social media. The research/education team problem-solved best ways to address the two issues on campus and how they would educate the community about the SDGs and #JoinTogether UHart. The fundraising team researched relevant organizations and raised \$400 for two of them. The artistic team created educational materials for presentation that were guided by the 7 digital trends outlined by the UN in their creations (Erdoğan, 2018). The community connections team identified on and off-campus organizations for potential partnerships. The social media team used Twitter (@jointogetheruoh) and Instagram (jointogetheruhart) to highlight the project and share relevant content. Students had to rely on the other teams' work thereby becoming accountable to each other rather than solely to me as the instructor. For example, the research team had to create, distribute, and analyze the survey before the artistic team could create educational and presentation materials. At the beginning of each class, students provided updates about their team's progress providing an opportunity for feedback and problem-solving together. These check-ins showed the class we took their work seriously and was important beyond a grade. We built a classroom that was enthusiastic, collaborative, and engaged.

At the end of the semester, all FYS classes presented their projects at a college symposium, similar to a scientific poster session. My class shared their survey results, continued to fundraise, and educated the audience about the SDGs with an interactive activity. People could choose one of the SDGs that they most wanted to support. The social media team took their picture holding the appropriate SDG square logo and these were projected onto the wall behind our table so everyone in the room saw them in real time. #JoinTogether UHart received the "audience

favorite" award. It is not surprising that, on a Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), student evaluations showed tremendous enthusiasm for the subject (4.9) and being provided with useful information and skills (4.8).

## Discussion

As a global call to action, the SDGs can be a useful framework to educate current students who will be future healthcare advocates, policy makers, and leaders. Educators can use the SDGs to teach how inseparable the planet's most urgent issues are. Assignments that require critically thinking about the intersections between the SDGs (e.g., Global Changemakers), requires students to make their own connections that are not always explicitly stated in the targets. Although I requested that students examine the relationship between their SDG and gender equality (SDG 5) to highlight the visibility of women's efforts in global change, instructors could alter this assignment to fit course content. Faculty teaching Health Psychology, for example, could focus on good health and well-being (SDG 3) and require that students investigate how it intersects with poverty (SDG 1), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), or any other issue pertinent to the course or region. Because the SDGs encompass so many issues, it allows for flexibility and creative class assignments.

#JoinTogether UHart required active participation, treated students as co-creators rather than passive recipients, and provided both academic and advocacy skills. Students were encouraged to share their viewpoints and question project decisions. With time, they felt more empowered to engage with each other without relying on the preceptor and me. My students were invested and genuinely felt that they contributed to the larger good. In fact, several students were disappointed when the course ended and sought

out other opportunities (academic and non-academic) where they could continue to advocate for gender equity and women's health. Being part of a larger, global effort provides meaning to students who may not initially see the connection between course work and its significance in the world. Instructors could seek out larger SDG efforts and resources, some of which I introduce below, and adapt them for their classrooms in an effort to interest students in issues of health equity. We could be educating future healthcare advocates.

It is highly unlikely, however, that one college class can create global citizens. But if universities focused on courses and programs with a commitment to equity and inclusion rather than measuring success by graduation rates and similar indices (Allias et al., 2020), then maybe UNESCO is correct and quality education is what is needed to achieve all 17 SDGs.

Instructors are key to meeting the targets of quality education, but in disadvantaged parts of the world, there are teacher shortages, lack of professional training, and scarce resources (UNESCO, 2017). Perhaps the way we think of "teachers" can be expanded. Student preceptors may be a novel way to support SDG 4 (quality education). Just as nurse preceptors help novice colleagues in healthcare settings, student preceptors can mentor junior peers in a classroom which has been shown to have a positive effect on students (Black & Voelker, 2008). My preceptor was an international student who helped us all "think globally" which was invaluable to the SDG-related projects. His academic abilities were equally matched by a vivacious, genuine concern for the class; I am certain his support contributed to the high scores on enthusiasm and skill development. I find learner-centered classrooms to be much more time-consuming than "traditional" (lecture and exams) courses and preceptors can help by addressing students' concerns outside of class. In fact, some students are more comfortable asking the preceptor, rather than the instructor, for help.

But, there is negligible research on the efficacy of student preceptors and more evidence is needed to suggest how and where their efforts would be best utilized.

Being part of a larger professional organization, academic field, or initiative tied to the UN can provide opportunities for educators to form partnerships and share pedagogical practices. Currently, the #JoinTogether network is dormant and DMU is focusing its attention on SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions; M. Charlton, personal communication, March 11, 2021). In the field of psychology, "Psychology Day at the United Nations" has offered an opportunity to discuss psychology's role in addressing global concerns since 2007 (PCUN, 2021). The European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) has had a formal relationship with the UN since 2011 (EHPS, n.d.). In 1979, The Association for Women in Psychology (AWP) joined the UN during the "United Nations Decade for Women" making it one of the oldest feminist organizations to be affiliated (Tiefer, 1991).

SDG teaching resources are plentiful. The United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) is an initiative that brings together research and educational institutions which share a commitment to ten basic principles (UN, n.d.-b). Both UNICEF (World's Largest Lesson, n.d.) and UNESCO (n.d.) are excellent sources of information. The UN also provides a link to download the SDG icons and posters (UN, n.d.-c) which students and I used for class and the symposium. There are other independent, global efforts that provide teaching resources, databases, curricula, charts, presentations, and various projects: #TeachSDGs (Teach SDGs, n.d.), 17Goals (17Goals, n.d.), and Our World in Data (n.d.).

My seminar ended prior to COVID-19, but it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the global pandemic has intensified inequities. Women have disproportionately been impacted by economic, health, unpaid care work, and gender-

based violence (UN, 2020a). Education systems have been hit hard and suddenly—schools have closed but remote learning has deepened the digital divide disproportionately affecting students in some of the poorest countries (UN, 2020b). These impacts highlight the need to address some of the criticisms of the SDGs particularly in relation to the interpretation of good health and well-being (Eckermann, 2016), gender equality (Razavi, 2019), contradictory relationship to growth (Hickel, 2015) and protection of women’s human rights (Sen, 2019). The limited progress in meeting the 2030 agenda may even be reversed (UN, 2020b). Recently, the UN Secretary-General stated that “while every country has the right – and the duty – to protect its own people, no country can afford to neglect the rest of the world” (Guterres, 2021). For instructors in privileged circumstances, we have the responsibility to act with responsive pedagogies that include, not ignore, catastrophic global health crises like the coronavirus pandemic. I urge us to be the global citizens he calls for and the kind of students we hope to graduate.

#### Author Note

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