

## Faculty Reflection: Kyrgyzstan

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The Seneca team tasked with developing the preparatory-year curriculum for the University of Central Asia (UCA) was asked to incorporate a problem-based, discovery approach to teaching and learning. But beyond that, we were asked to develop this curriculum in a way that was both culturally and geographically relevant to students from the area. These are wonderful principles, but how does one do this for a country in Central Asia, half way around the world, when one has never been there? To add to the complexity of the task, the UCA campus was purposefully situated not in a large urban centre of the Kyrgyzstan, but in a remote, mountainous community. A daunting task indeed! Nonetheless, we began drafting the curriculum, at each turn being asked to be more explicit in explaining the philosophy of our approach and the intention of each aspect of each lesson.

When the Seneca team – consisting of Jamie Zeppa who helped develop the English curriculum, Eugene Earnshaw who developed the science curriculum, and myself who wrote the first semester math curriculum – first arrived in the Kyrgyzstan (after travelling for 17 hours on a trip that spanned 11 time zones), the enormity of the task became even more apparent. We then drove for five hours into the mountains to the remote city of Naryn, where the UCA campus is situated. I'm not sure at this point if any of us knew what to expect.



Riaz, Jamie, and Eugene with some of the faculty from UCA; image courtesy of Riaz Saloojee

We finally had the opportunity to interact with the inaugural cohort of UCA students, and witness the curriculum we wrote come to life in the classrooms. What we observed exceeded our highest expectations, and we were thrilled! We offered our feedback to the faculty teaching the curriculum that we developed, and gave suggestions on how to improve delivery by keeping more in line with its intended purposes. The feedback was well received by both faculty and administration.

When considering this entire experience, from developing the curriculum to observing its implementation, I keep reflecting on how much about the disciplines we teach, our philosophies of teaching and learning, as well as our understanding about the students before us, go unquestioned. We may never be able to identify every assumption we make when developing lessons and teaching them, but we should continue to be ever vigilant in recognizing this very fact, and embrace the moments when they are brought to light.

I was also struck by how much of what we do is universal, whether here at Seneca College or half way around the world in the Kyrgyzstan. Perhaps more than anything else, these realizations are what we brought back with us from our travels abroad, and what we will carry with us here at Seneca.

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