Teaching culturally diverse students

Many factors will influence the effectiveness of transnational education whether you are teaching in offshore settings or with students from diverse cultures in an Australian classroom. This guide provides an overview of the key considerations in preparing to teach culturally diverse students in transnational settings.

Understanding cultural differences

Understanding the cultural differences that exist between teachers and students, or within student cohorts, will assist you to achieve good teaching outcomes by:

• Minimising misunderstandings or confused communication.
• Effectively engaging students in classroom discussions and activities.
• Reducing the risk of student attrition.

Adjusting your teaching approach to accommodate cultural differences will enhance the quality of your teaching, and foster student engagement and learning.

Preparing to teach in culturally diverse settings

Developing intercultural skills or intercultural competence requires:

• A good understanding of your own culture and the impact this has on your approach to teaching.
• An appreciation of how cultural nuances impact student behaviour.
• An understanding of how to present to your students in different cultural contexts without losing the educational value of your message.

If you have been educated in Australia and your employment experience is limited to Australia or other western countries, it is important to remember that you will not share the same frame of reference as your students particularly when you teach offshore. As with Australian students, students at our offshore campuses and partner institutions will usually expect ‘local examples’, ‘useful cases’ and ‘actual experiences’ to present and illustrate concepts and theories. To be meaningful these must be relevant to the students’ own frames of reference and have practical applications in their own local contexts.

There are a number of things you can do to prepare to teach culturally diverse students.
In the Australian classroom, teachers wear many hats – that of a subject or course expert, coach, facilitator and discussion leader. We create the conditions for learning and provide rules for dialogue and discussion. We want our students to reflect critically. We welcome questions that clarify concepts, offer a new idea and even perhaps a contradictory opinion. We do our best to put the student at the centre of learning. In contrast, traditional Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) promotes a teacher-dominated style of learning. The role of teachers in a CHC classroom is to impart specialist knowledge and the students’ role is to absorb it. Accordingly, teachers are not questioned – how can a novice challenge an expert? Students pay respect to their teachers and not cause their teachers to lose face by asking questions or arguing a point.

Current research suggests that CHC students adapt to new approaches of learning and take on learning styles quite different from those they have been used to (Kennedy, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2006). In this context there is an opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills. Egege and Kutieleh (2004) suggest some steps in teaching critical thinking to international students, including demonstrating the means and procedures expected within a Western critical thinking style and getting students to participate in workshops where they will recognize, evaluate and construct arguments by applying the analytic techniques they learned.

Contextualising content
- Be aware of cultural assumptions embedded in Australian or Western textbooks.
- Contextualise curriculum content for offshore students through local examples or case studies to demonstrate the theoretical principles explained in textbooks. For example, citing business studies of Haier in China or Temasek Holdings in Singapore can stimulate interesting discussions about local businesses.
- You can also contextualise the curriculum by drawing on your students’ familiarity with their own country and culture. This can be achieved by asking the students questions that provide information about local contexts and practices that will be useful for the whole class.

If referring to aspects of Australian and/or Western popular culture such as advertisements, slogans, TV shows and colloquial expressions to explain a concept to your students, it is helpful to carefully explain their meaning.

Overcoming language challenges
Language challenges are common for staff teaching in transnational settings.
- Pay special attention to your verbal communication to ensure it is clear.
- Use simple language to elaborate on ideas or concepts.
- Carefully select and articulate words.
- Find alternative words to explain an idea or concept if you have selected word/s unknown to students.
- Slow down your speech if you tend to speak quickly.
- Ensure you project your voice so that it can be easily and clearly heard.
- Consider providing lecture slides as handouts.
- It may help to give your students an idea of what is to be discussed in the next class. This will help prepare them for what they will hear. It also provides opportunities for students to read materials in advance, which can assist with comprehension.
- Be aware that it may take students additional time to complete reading assignments. Shorter and more frequent reading assignments tend to be more effective than providing lengthy readings. Highlight any textbook features that are student-friendly such as chapter overviews and summaries, review exercises and glossaries.

Facilitating student participation
In traditional Asian classrooms, lectures are the usual method of instruction. Class discussions and group work are not commonly used. When students do not actively participate in class it is common to assume that they are uninterested, passive or have not completed the reading assignment or prepared for class. These assumptions are often incorrect. Motivating your students to participate in class may be achieved by accommodating their cultural differences. For instance:
• Tap into collectivist preferences by asking students to work in small groups to consolidate a group perspective on an issue or answer to a problem.

• Be aware of differences in student status — it is not uncommon for a student to defer to a student perceived to be more senior or of higher status.

• Create a safe learning environment. In many cultures 'saving face' (prestige, honour, reputation) is important. Students may not participate in activities if they feel they may lose or cause a loss of face. It is important to be aware that students might not willingly participate in activities they fear may cause embarrassment to them or another, especially to another of more senior status.

Students from some cultures have a low tolerance for uncertainty. These students will avoid ambiguity and risk, and function more effectively when provided with clearly defined structures and information about what is about to happen. If you are teaching at RMIT’s offshore campuses or partner institutions it may be helpful to adopt a structured approach to your classes. Arkoudis (2006) discusses how teachers can make lectures more accessible by providing a lecture outline and making links to other topics covered in the material. Concept maps, diagrams and schematic representations are also helpful tools.

Students need to feel that they can actively contribute in class and that their contribution is acknowledged. It is always helpful to explain how the lessons will be delivered as well as the benefits of discussion and group work. It will be helpful to gradually ease students into class activities they may not be familiar with by keeping early activities short and simple and then building their complexity once students have developed a level of confidence in learning through discussion and group work.

### Differing perspectives on academic integrity

The concept of academic integrity is culturally dependent. You should explain and reinforce the concept of plagiarism, and be explicit about the University’s policy on academic integrity in general and plagiarism in particular.

### Teaching transnational students in Melbourne

Most of the challenges experienced by our academic and teaching staff working offshore are very similar to what is encountered in culturally diverse classes in Melbourne.

An emphasis on lectures and teacher–centred approaches in some schools and universities may result in limited mastering of critical thinking and analytical skills. International students may also have difficulty relating to ideas and examples that are culturally bound to Australian contexts.

International students can face language barriers which may lead to limited confidence to contribute in large group discussions. Discussing ways to make group work productive checking for understanding and eliciting the opinions of those who have not contributed can help facilitate inclusiveness. Teachers can also capitalise on the knowledge international students bring by extracting interesting and useful information. By valuing international students’ input, we model inclusive behaviour for all our students.

“…it was precisely because of the professor’s expertise in intercultural communication coupled with opportunities presented by the course-content that cross-cultural adjustment was possible for the students and professor alike and that a mutually empowering, ethical and effective learning environment was negotiated.” (Crabtree, R. & D. Sapp (2004:124)
Interacting with offshore colleagues (local teachers working in RMIT offshore campuses)

When people move between countries and cultures it is common to seek out a set of do’s and don’ts. However, these do not provide reasons for appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, making it difficult to negotiate situations that are not covered. It is more helpful to have a broader perspective and understanding of the cultures and sub-cultures of the country. This allows us to focus on the situation at hand and make informed choices about what might be appropriate.

The most important cultural attributes that we might see operating in organisations in countries like China and Vietnam are formality, consensus building and harmony. Behaving with decorum and avoiding public embarrassment ensures a sense of harmony. We expect to spend time building personal relationships and getting to know our colleagues. Understanding our offshore colleagues’ communication style is essential for us to establish rapport and understanding. Communication styles in countries like China and Vietnam may be less direct than those typically encountered in Australia. This means that individuals often speak in a circuitous way by being more general and tactful. Non-verbal communication assumes a very important role in providing cues and clues. During meetings for instance, if an individual disagrees with someone else’s opinion, he/she will remain quiet to avoid a loss of face. Both parties lose face if one speaks up and disagrees publicly. As non-verbal communication is very nuanced, there is a reliance on facial expression, tone of voice and posture for cues. Note the impassive expression of the Chinese while communicating. A frown while someone is speaking may imply disagreement. Looking straight into another person’s eyes might be considered disrespectful. To maintain their privacy in crowded situations Chinese and Vietnamese people may avoid eye contact.

Summary

An awareness and understanding of the diverse cultural backgrounds and learning approaches, styles and preferences of your students helps to provide an enriching educational experience. This requires that you get to know your students and how cultural influences have shaped their approach to learning. You can then consider how you might adapt your teaching style and approach to accommodate the cultural norms and the preferred learning styles of students.

Useful resources

Support is available from your Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching) or equivalent. Your College Academic Development Group or learning & teaching specialist can also provide advice, support and professional development.

RMIT University’s practical guides to teaching will help you to plan and improve your teaching practice:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/practical

Helpful websites on inclusive teaching practices (curriculum, assessment and cultural diversity) are provided at the RMIT University’s School of Science Engineering & Health:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/seh/staff/inclusiveteaching
Working with Students from China is a helpful online resource produced by Monash University. It puts into context the experience of international students, particularly those from China, studying in Australia. It also presents issues that teachers deal with when teaching international students and how to address them:


Glauco De Vita (2000) writes in the context of international business education with a focus on culturally inclusive pedagogies and provides practical suggestions on communicating effectively with and engaging international students to actively participate in the classroom:

http://alh.sagepub.com/content/1/2/168

http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources_teach/teaching_in_practice/docs/international.pdf - This online guide, prepared by Dr. Sophie Arkoudis of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, provides comprehensive advice on teaching international students and enhancing their learning.

RMIT’s video series “Perspectives on Learning and Teaching” presents short vignettes about student-centred learning, learner diversity, student engagement and preparing to teach:


References


Turner, Y. 2009 ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You, Is There Nothing We Can Do? Pedagogic challenges in using group work to create an intercultural learning space’, Robert Gordon University http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/13/2/240