

Teaching Insight: Cross-cultural classes and inclusion



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How can teachers improve the learning experience in diverse classes? Here are some practical evidence-based strategies that can help.

As a starting point, check out the principles from the Finding Common Ground report (see resources):

1. Acknowledge and capitalise on student diversity as a resource for learning and teaching
2. Engage students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the learning context in a variety of ways
3. Embed interaction in curriculum planning and link to teaching, learning and assessment;
4. Promote peer engagement through curriculum-based activities
5. Recognise the variety of ways that interaction can be utilised across different learning contexts.

Also, take a look at the 'Teaching inclusively' resources on the Sydney professional learning framework site: <https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/1316/pages/introduction-to-teaching-inclusively>

Question your assumptions

It can be tempting to view students from particular cultures as all behaving in the same way. For example:

Specifically in relation to Chinese students and silence, the 'deficit' model tends to stereotype students as passive learners who are reluctant to speak in the classroom. Their reticence in this model is often linked to obedience, lack of critical thinking, spontaneous oral participation, sitting quietly, or having no questions or answers....Under this approach, Chinese students have been homogenised and thus variations across generations of Chinese learners and the changes that have occurred both inside and outside China over time have been ignored. (Ha & Li, 2014, p. 234)

Students being quiet in class doesn't necessarily mean that they are disengaged. It's important to view students as individuals, and bring your own cross-cultural understanding to your teaching. You can further develop your cultural competence skills via the National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC) <http://sydney.edu.au/nccc/>. Students are also able to access cultural competence modules via the NCCC, and will soon be able to take Open Learning Environment units on cultural competence.

Ideas to try

- Team-based games that emphasise diversity as a strength - see the games developed by Ehssan Sakhaee and student Roman Eymont. The games emphasised the importance of peer collaboration, different aspects of diversity (i.e not just country of origin) and the advantages of both for learning: <http://sydney.edu.au/education-portfolio/ei/teaching@sydney/cultural-competence-engineering/>
- Invite the students to discuss the topic from an array of diverse perspectives. For example, Mark McEntee who teaches medical radiation science, asks students to name the colour red in their own languages. He then reminds everyone that there is a universal term for the colour red, its wavelength, which is a neat way of both acknowledging diversity and linking to the discipline. Mark also emphasises the value of knowing languages other than English, and asks students to find a research article in their own language and summarise it in English. You can find out more here: https://prezi.com/dteyhctkascr/inclusive-teaching/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy

Please read on for some more detailed case studies.

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Simple sparks for inclusive and accessible teaching

Jennifer Ong

Despite obvious reasons for incorporating the accompanying vernacular (both technical and colloquial) in teaching in the Australian context, I was prompted to re-evaluate my approach after delivering a lesson to a class that was predominantly made up of international students. It was a reflective activity, during which I had asked a student, “did you have any light bulb moments?”. He stared back blankly. I made a futile attempt to explain and gesture the meaning of the expression but the situation looked dim. I thought later, it may have been helpful had I simply pulled up a cartoon depicting the same idea. Altogether, this reinforced the importance of being culturally aware and highlighted the potential of multimedia as a universal teaching tool for overcoming cultural barriers and ensuring that teaching is accessible to all students in the classroom.

The Finding Common Ground report also recommends that teachers engage students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the learning context in a variety of ways for enhancing interaction between domestic and international students, which is also important for nurturing a sense of belonging and support, in addition to developing cognitive understanding. In the Faculty of Pharmacy, Betty Chaar has long known to engage students through selectively playing contemporary music for teaching mental health. Rather than didactically teaching about the treatment and clinical effects of lithium in the treatment of bipolar disorder, students gain insight through listening to the audio and seeing the lyrics for the song Lithium by Evanescence in the first instance. During Week 4 // Open Door, Adrian George kept pharmacy students engaged with a live demonstration during a chemistry lecture on acids and bases. In the online environment, the University is also raising awareness around inclusive culture with a focus on universal access and design as we transition to the new learning management system Canvas. However, at the best of times words can still be limited and although flashy programs and zingy apps appear to be the flavour of the month in the realm of edtech, when considered carefully and used appropriately, concepts can still be conveyed effectively with simpler technologies such as a sound file, a few beakers, or in some cases, a humble light bulb.

Teamwork in groups with diverse backgrounds

Ali Hadigheh

I teach a unit of study which is compulsory to all second-year students in the faculty. The cohort consists of various engineering disciplines, e.g. aeronautical, biomedical, chemical & biomolecular, civil, electrical, mechanical, and software, with a large proportion of international students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Creativity, innovation and collaboration are main pillars for success in engineering projects. Teamwork experiences can be enhanced through arranging groups with diverse backgrounds (Weaver, 2017), which facilitates different viewpoints, knowledge and perspectives. In this unit of study, I form groups from students with different cultural backgrounds. Students are engaged in real-world projects that require them to think innovatively, independently, and resourcefully and to identify the skills required to successfully complete their project. Various types of formative assessments are employed to improve students’ academic and professional skills through the group project. Students are also asked to engage in a self and peer review process during their project. It helps them monitor their own progress as they get feedback from the teacher and/or peers, allowing the opportunity to revise and refine their thinking. The literature also indicates various benefits in having students assess each other (Black & William, 2006; Schneider & Preckel, 2017). Knowing that their project will be assessed by their peers, students may pay more attention to detail in their work and receive various perspectives from their peers from different cultural backgrounds. In this process, I monitor and assess group dynamics and facilitate the learning process by adapting instructional methods to meet students’ needs, and intervene as needed.

Improving domestic-international student interactions: a two-way process

Anne Honey

In the discipline of occupational therapy (OT), we are interested in promoting social interaction between international and domestic students. Based on the literature, this is likely to be beneficial for international students by enhancing belonging, improving social support, and providing opportunities to practice English skills (e.g., Glass & Westmont, 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). It also enables enhanced intercultural competence for all students. Yet lack of interaction between domestic and

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international students has been commonly reported (e.g., Fincher & Shaw, 2011) and is a source of concern for educators (Leask, 2009). It is important that improving domestic-international student interactions is not seen as requiring international students to adapt, but as a two-way process where both domestic and international students have skills and strengths and both are likely to need support and encouragement (Arthur, 2017; Leask, 2009).

Improving domestic-international student interaction is likely to be a slow process and require a variety of strategies (Leask, 2009), including in-class strategies and co-curricular strategies. In-class strategies can be as simple as allocating groups for tutorial work instead of allowing students to always work with their friends. We try to do this in fast, but fun ways, which encourage all students to interact; for example, giving each student a picture of an animal which they have to match to find their group, or asking them to line up for grouping in order of where their birthday falls in the year. We try to make sure that some activities rely on cross-cultural knowledge for success so that the knowledge and experiences of international students are used and valued, for example, comparing conceptualisations of disability in different countries. In terms of co-curricular strategies, we run a program for all first year students called “OT Culture Swap”. Students who sign-up for this program (usually 50-60% of the cohort) are allocated a “culture swap buddy” from a different cultural background. Each week during semester 1, they meet for an informal chat over coffee, lunch or whatever they wish, about an allocated topic. These range from flippant (e.g., television) to serious (e.g., mental health) and students post a photo of themselves on a private e-community depicting something they learned about each other. Students come together for an end of semester morning tea, with cultural foods and a “most creative photo” prize. Most students indicate in the evaluation that they value the program and that it enables them to learn about another culture and get to know someone they would otherwise not have known.

Meaningful engagement with peers and with course material

Fady Aoun

In his seminal book, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, the late Professor Paul Ramsden warned of the ‘unintended consequences’ that might arise from teacher-led interventions in higher education (Ramsden 2003, p. 63). Our best intentions as academics in promoting more culturally inclusive and interactive classrooms might not necessarily translate well when viewed through students’ eyes. There are of course other inherent dangers (e.g. cultural missteps) that one must contend with while navigating through the ‘cultural minefield’ of diverse classrooms (see for example Jimenez et al., 2017). Such concerns, however, should not deter us in our efforts in fostering inclusive and respectful teaching and learning. The *Finding Common Ground* report (especially its core principles framework) offers an excellent starting point for academics seeking to enhance peer interaction in culturally and linguistically diverse student cohorts.

These core principles find expression in the Foundations of Law (JD) course, a first-year compulsory course in the law degree taught over four weeks and which contains a diverse cohort, replete with a strong contingent of international students. The small group seminar teaching method employed in this intensive course offers scope for deep student engagement, especially given the strong focus on student-led interactions, which are assessed via ‘free form’ general class participation, individual class presentations and group presentations.

Students from culturally diverse backgrounds are an invaluable learning and teaching resource, especially when efforts are made to ensure all students engage meaningfully with their peers. Such meaningful engagement is facilitated in part through the material covered and the teaching and learning method employed. For instance, students when discussing critical legal studies, especially the work of critical race scholars, offer diverse and instructive perspectives that are often rooted in lived experiences. Group presentations on the human rights jurisprudence of various nation states offer another useful opportunity for drawing to attention cross-cultural issues. In particular, this task invariably generate, a variety of informative inter and intra-group opinions on collective and individual human rights. Importantly, the groups are randomly selected by the lecturer so as to encourage a diverse peer interaction experience and this is generally well-received by students.

The learning design here aims to improve the learning and cross-cultural experience for students in diverse cohorts and is fundamentally bound together by a common idea: mutual self-respect. Building on this idea, we must be guard against adopting a cynical checklist approach to cross-cultural inclusive practices and ensure a natural approach to such practices is embedded into our curriculum planning and teaching.

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Resources

The Finding Common Ground report:

http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1861938/FindingCommonGround_web.pdf

See Dr Adrian George's Week 4 // Open Door live chemistry lecture demonstration:

<http://sydney.edu.au/education-portfolio/ei/teaching@sydney/happened-week-4-open-door/>

Universal Design in Canvas

<http://sydney.edu.au/education-portfolio/ei/teaching@sydney/inclusive-culture-teaching-universal-design-canvas-event/>

Promise and pitfalls of edtech

<https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21725285-reformers-are-using-new-software-personalise-learning-technology-transforming-what-happens>

Myth busting and checking assumptions

<https://theconversation.com/telling-chinese-students-to-conform-wont-fix-cross-cultural-issues-85666>

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