

International Students and Inclusive Teaching Practices in the Faculty of Arts

Approximately 25% of the Arts Faculty's more than 9,000 students are categorised as 'international students' in that they are not Australian or New Zealand citizens or do not hold a permanent residency visa. Approximately one-third of the faculty's international students come from four countries: China (12%), Singapore (10%), Hong Kong (8%), and Malaysia (5%). In addition to the international student enrolment, the Faculty of Arts has approximately 200 exchange students plus a substantial number of students who are from homes where their first language is not English, or foreign students who have come to Australia to complete their secondary studies and who come to University via the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Committee. Consequently, the student community within the faculty is linguistically and culturally diverse.

This brief report focuses on two parts. The first (Part A) provides some general observations on teaching culturally diverse classes and the needs of international students in particular. The second (Part B) gives some practical guidelines for syllabus design, class organisation and inclusive teaching practices.

PART A: CONTEXT

A recent survey of international students and their experiences at Melbourne University demonstrated that "... students were very positive about their experiences in their courses. They highly valued the opportunities for personal growth and academic achievement. However, the students said that they encountered problems with initiation into their course, participating successfully in a Western academic environment, English language skills and engaging comfortably with the rest of the University community" (Arkoudis, 2006, p 6).

Of course, the difficulties in making a transition to university are not exclusive to international students, and many domestic (including indigenous) students face significant similar transition issues when they arrive at university (Krause et al., 2005). All students face challenges such as: finding their way around in a new environment; achieving an identity within a large, and somewhat daunting, institution; and having to cope with a range of new cultural experiences (both academic and administrative) where the assumption is that you will be able to cope with independent learning and decision making (Millar, 2009). In coming to university, students are expected to develop new ways of thinking, learning and communicating (McLean and Ransom, 2005) and, for international students and some domestic students, this is ordinarily achieved in the absence of previous support networks. Over recent years Monash University has provided an orientation experience that endeavours to ease the transition of students into the university. Improvements to the orientation and transition process will help all students adapt to university (Rhoden and Boin, 2008).

The major differences in challenges faced between domestic and international students are language and culture. Even those international students who arrive from English speaking backgrounds may find it difficult to adjust to the Australian accent, speed at which we talk, and the numerous idioms and colloquial language that we employ.

International students bring a suite of benefits to a domestic student's university experience. The intercultural competencies that domestic students experience and

develop, assuming that they engage with international students, provide them with transferable skills for their future professions. For a university such as Monash, which prides itself on being an international university and embeds this in a number of its graduate attributes, this experience is crucial as not all students will have access to the opportunity to study abroad. However, it is not enough to just bring international students to Australia and assume that they will succeed, mix with Australian students, and have an overwhelmingly positive experience – we need to make the curriculum more accessible and amenable to diverse student needs.

The ways in which we teach and learn are defined or constructed by our culture, and potentially these may cause confusion for a significant portion of students from different cultural backgrounds. These difficulties range from modes of, and deference to, authority; being comfortable with critical inquiry; transition to western academic writing styles, assessment tasks and notions of plagiarism, and appropriate behaviour and recognition. Age, gender and personality are other important drivers of our response to different learning environments.

Understanding differences in culture and educational styles forms the basis of developing intercultural competency among our staff and students. This is no less important when teaching indigenous students or non-indigenous students from remote rural regions. In developing intercultural competencies two concurrent pathways should be considered (McLean and Ransom, 2005):

1. To become more aware of your own cultural “pre-programming”, to understand the assumptions that underpin your own thinking, learning, writing and communication styles – all the expectations, interpretations, and understandings which are so much part of your consciousness that they are often overlooked.
2. To learn about the cultural encoding of others. This goes far beyond linguistic, racial or ethnic difference. The way we think, teach and learn is created by our life experiences and, in addition to our ethnicity, includes influences such as gender, work experience and academic discipline.

These ideas challenge our own assumptions about what makes a good teacher and these assumptions are open to cultural interpretation. For example, many international students in our faculty come from “cultures characterised by large power distance [which] accept inequality as normal. Large power distance societies have a teacher-centred classroom where teacher is the expert, they are respected, never contradicted or criticised, and students only speak when invited” (McLean and Ransom, 2005, p4). Those students “from high uncertainty avoidance cultures like clear structure, rules and parameters and are less comfortable with ambiguity and unpredictability. These students prefer explicit instructions, need to know the correct answers, and demand strict timelines and rules. They don’t like ‘choose your own topic’ assessment, lecturers who won’t give answers to exams and the concept of independent learning. Students from these cultures feel cheated if presented with ‘more than one answer’” (McLean and Ransom, 2005, p4). As a practical example, a student may be unwilling to contribute in a class discussion owing to a number of reasons completely unrelated to not being prepared (the general Australian assumption). They may feel that it is culturally inappropriate to challenge a tutor or lecturer, they may feel that they lack the expertise required to contribute to such a discussion, or they may be concerned about the embarrassment and cultural shame of ‘losing face’ if what they say is not correct. All of these perceptions operate within a cultural framework quite different to that of

the domestic Australian student. In addition, the Western assumption that talking is connected to thinking is not shared in the East (McLean and Ransom, 2005).

Some academic staff may treat, or be perceived by, international students in a culturally imperialistic way (McLean and Ransom, 2005) and expect them to conform to existing and often long-held views regarding Australian methods of teaching and learning. Instead, what is required is a move towards a middle-ground where every student in the class is provided with equal opportunity to engage and learn (Millar, 2009). Students are excluded from learning opportunities when: (i) treated with disrespect or unfairness; (ii) student backgrounds, preparation or life events that affect learning are disregarded; (iii) only a sub-set of students are interacted with; and (iv) teaching methods are employed which favour particular backgrounds or approaches to learning (Millar, 2009).

Analyses of a range of academic performance data for the Arts Faculty (2004-9) shows:

- higher retention rates among international students than domestic students;
- higher average results for international students than their domestic peers (especially when they come from homes where English is the spoken language);
- those students struggling the most academically in terms of grades are domestic students from non-English speaking background (NESB);
- the lowest retention rates are seen in the cohort of domestic students where English is the language spoken at home; and
- students from English speaking backgrounds generally perform above their NESB cohort
- there are some small variations in the academic performance of international students from different homelands. Students from countries who have stronger English-speaking backgrounds and more westernised cultures such as Singapore may perform better than those from other cultures such as China where the initial transition may be more challenging.

In summary, much of this data conflicts with some negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of international students although it does not obviate the need for cultural sensitivity or for the application of inclusive teaching practices to enrich the learning of our entire student body.

PART B:

Inclusive Teaching Practices for the Faculty of Arts

The key to establishing inclusive teaching practices is working effectively with diversity. Diversity is not just about distinguishing local from international students. And it is certainly not about stereotyping different groups and responding accordingly. For example, our academic staff reflects an enormous cultural diversity and this report is very mindful of not stereotyping our tutors and lecturers as a mono-cultural body.

Every classroom within the Faculty of Arts, and beyond, contains students with diverse backgrounds in expectations, age, gender, religion, disability, educational background and class. “It is an all inclusive mixture of differences and similarities along a given dimension and contributes substantially to the complexity of individual learning styles

evident in any classroom” (McLean and Ransom, 2005, p1). The goal of inclusive teaching is recognising these differences, and working towards a classroom environment that celebrates diversity and provides opportunities for all to learn. The classroom is the most effective forum for effective engagement with students in a university that celebrates its diversity, global reach, internationalisation and social inclusion. Academic staff already face significant time and workload pressures and may shudder at the idea of reworking their syllabus, however, in most cases inclusive teaching really only requires a clearer awareness and acceptance of the student’s diverse learning styles and expectations along with an understanding of the impact of different teaching practices.

Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching

The following dot points provide practical suggestions towards inclusive teaching in lectures and tutorials, group work, and written assessment (adapted from McLean and Ransom, 2005; and Arkoudis, 2006). Some or all of these should be attempted where appropriate.

(i) Lectures and tutorials

To avoid embarrassing situations, and before classes get underway, you should make sure that students know what to call you, your role in their learning, and how and when they can access you. This could be done verbally at the start of the semester and/or by placing the information in relevant unit guides or websites.

For lectures

- Begin each lecture with a clear ‘map’ of what topics or concepts will be covered and why.
- Highlight new terms during lectures or provide a vocabulary list (or even pre-teach key vocabulary and concepts), explaining technical or discipline-specific terms in units with high levels of jargon.
- Avoid slang and colloquial expressions. These culturally embedded references impede understanding and have pejorative connotations for target groups rather than the entire class.
- Paraphrase difficult or key concepts and link back to previous lectures or topics where appropriate. Use examples or case studies where possible to illustrate your argument.
- When discussing alternative theoretical frameworks or research methods, be explicit about your expectations so that students will determine their appropriateness for particular situations.
- Provide a lecture outline or summary for students to use as a guide and for note taking and review. A page length lecture summary can be much more effective for revision purposes than a PowerPoint thumbnail.
- Invite students to ask questions during the lecture, but understand their reluctance to do so. Stopping and quizzing the class (with ‘show of hands answers’ can be one way of gauging their understanding of a key concept or theory.
- Where possible, and especially at first year level, record lectures (via MULO) so that international students who are not highly proficient at

listening and writing may return to the lecture to clarify any misunderstandings

- Provide a summary of the main conclusions at the end of the lecture and provide brief details of what the next lecture will cover so that students can prepare ahead.

For tutorials

- Ensure that all students are made aware that the tutorial room is a safe environment where all views are respected and everyone is encouraged to contribute.
- Make clear your expectations that all students will participate in any tutorial discussions and how they should do so
- Create ample opportunities for students to get to know each other through ice breaker type games and small group work as this translates to better interactions amongst the group.
- Make the effort to know your students names. This shows that you care about your class (perhaps write on cards for the first few weeks or use the photo listings in the Callista student data base)
- Where possible, allow students to determine the content of a tutorial session. Having 'ownership' of what is being taught increases commitment (Whalley, 1997)
- Use signposts, gestures and key visuals to show the order of importance and relationships between ideas – especially those ideas presented orally.
- Make recently explained theories and concepts relevant to the students by using their own experiences as examples
- Small group work, or even pairs, facilitates conversation – all students are more likely to feel comfortable in these situations rather than voicing opinions in a whole-class situation
- Never assume that your students know what you are talking about, or that you know what they are talking about. Ask questions of your students and encourage them to do the same of you.
- In group work situations, ensure that the process as well as the outputs are made explicit. Provide students with some ground rules for discussion and participation and make your expectations regarding shared responsibilities for outcomes (especially any written tasks) transparent.
- When devolving responsibility for a task to individual students or groups, explain the pedagogical reasons for doing so
- Make explicit your reasons for asking questions in class and explain that you are not expecting perfect answers, and that errors are a part of learning. Allow students to learn through their mistakes in a non-threatening way.
- Ask students to brainstorm a topic. Explain the process involved and lay ground rules that all ideas are acceptable and that input from all is expected
- Encourage students to think of practical uses of theory, or theoretical issues, in their own cultural context (where appropriate). For example, how would this happen in your country.....?
- Provide students with the opportunity to prepare for their next class so that second language learners have adequate time to prepare and can discuss any problems before the class.

(ii) Group work activities

Some strategies for encouraging collaborative learning in culturally-mixed groups within the classroom include:

- Explain why group work is crucial to student development and give students a clear rationale, based upon unit objectives, unit assessment and post-university outcomes, for asking them to work together. Both local and international students must perceive the task as mutually valuable.
- Ensure that the allocation of marks is transparent and provided prior to commencing group work. This will ensure that all students within the group are aware of how 'their' grade will be determined and may reduce conflict amongst the group.
- Where possible, structure the progression of group work. First year may consist of small group assignments that allow the students to develop their group based skills (negotiating, setting priorities, breaking down tasks, delegating responsibility, giving effective feedback) while larger, more heavily weighted group assignments may be more suitable as later year projects.
- Conflict is part of group work - provide a set of rules as well as strategies for dealing with conflict
- For large group projects that are heavily weighted in terms of assessment, provide opportunities for the group to demonstrate that they are on task and to receive constructive feedback.

(iii) Written assessment tasks and set readings

Some strategies for developing inclusive practices for written assignments include (McLean and Ransom, 2008):

- Clarify the role of a reading list in your unit (as it may vary across the school or faculty) and what you expect a student to achieve
- Be explicit in clarifying aims and expectations of all tasks, even if it means explaining what a literature review is and how to write one. Don't assume that any student, especially at first year, will know how to do the set task.
- Incrementalise tasks so that students can develop a foundation on which to continually build their skills and competencies
- Incorporate the use of experts into first year classes – for example staff from the Arts Academic Language and Learning Unit, or the Learning Skills Service, are generally very willing to be involved at the class or unit level
- Model both good and bad examples of assessment tasks, and follow up with analysis, discussion and short exercises (Borland and Pearce, 1999)
- Allow students to learn from their mistakes. Give empathetic and respectful feedback, with clear comments about what is good and what needs improvement – a series of ticks, squiggles, or whys, without explanation, will not offer an opportunity to learn (or even make sense when read later)
- Ensure that written assignments are returned to students (rather than expecting them to collect them) so that they have the full opportunity to learn from the task.

Strategies that can be used to develop competencies in critical reading and writing include:

- Explain the purpose of a reading list and that it is not an exercise in reading everything and what you expect from the students as a bare minimum and what extra reading might achieve
- Provide a list of key questions for students to use when reading - breaking the task down into steps which might then be reconstructed later may make the task more manageable
- Use terms such as compare and contrast rather than criticise
- Where possible, apply theory to practice and place in the context of something familiar (particularly encourage students to use practical examples from the students own culture)
- Give students short texts in the beginning, with guided questions that elicit the level of analysis desired
- Provide opportunities in class, both whole and small group, to critically discuss the readings
- Model effective reading and critical thinking strategies in class by demonstrating them: use several small texts and evaluate them, guiding your students through your argument, opinion and supporting information
- Give constructive and respectful feedback, asking for clarification to further elicit evaluation and original thinking. Allow the student the opportunity to learn from their mistakes.
- When setting exam questions, use culturally neutral examples and avoid idiom.

6. References

- Arkoudis, S. 2006. Teaching International Students: Strategies to enhance learning. Accessed November 30 2009. <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/international.pdf>
- Australian Education International (2008) End of year summary of International Student Enrolment data – Australia – 2008. Accessed November 30th <http://www.idp.com/16aiecpapers/program/thursday/marketing2/Gallagher-pp.pdf>
- Australian Education International. 2009. Education Services for Overseas Students. Accessed December 1, 2009. <http://aei.gov.au/AEI/CmsTemplates/GeneralTemplates/LandingPage.aspx?NRMODE=Published&NRNODEGUID=%7b2F9C1196-4B2B-49A8-A64A-67B003520F81%7d&NRORIGINALURL=%2fAEI%2fESOS%2fDefault.htm&NRCACHEHINT=ModifyGuest>
- Borland, H. and Pearce, A. 1999. Valuing Diversity: Experiences and achievements of NESB students at Victoria University. Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology: Centre for Educational Development and Support.
- Department of Education, Science and Training (2002), Setting Firm Foundations: Financing Australian Higher Education, Higher Education Review Process, accessed November 30th http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/publications/setting_firm_foundations/purpose.htm
- Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R. and McInnis, C. (2005) The first year experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne. Accessed November 30th http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/first_year_experience.htm
- McLean, P. and Ransom, L. (2005) Building Intercultural competencies: Implications for academic skills development. Accessed November 30th <http://www.isana.org.au/academic/building-intercultural-competencies-implications-for-academic-skills-development.html>
- Millar, G. (2009) Working with international students: Applied linguistics and the art of inclusive teaching. TESOL in Context, Special Edition Volume 2 Pedagogies of Connection. Accessed November 30th http://www.tesol.org.au/files/files/91_Millar.pdf
- Moignard, M. 2006. Address to the Australian Education International Conference, October 2006. Accessed November 30th <http://www.austrade.gov.au/Australian-International-Education-Conference-2006/default.aspx>
- Rhoden, C. and Boin, K. 2008. Transition strategies for international students. Accessed November 30th <http://www.isana.org.au/student-support/transition-strategies-for-international-students.html>
- Schulz, L. 2009. Good Practice in the Provision of Education to International Students in Australia: Government Interventions in Ensuring Quality and Fairness. AUA Annual Conference, April 2009.

Whalley, T. 1997. Best practice guidelines for internationalising the curriculum. British Columbia: Ministry of Education, Skills and Training and the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology.