



Responding to Cross-Cultural Diversity

Overview

Today's university classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse. This poses challenges for both students and academics, who must cope with different learning styles, unfamiliar learning environments, diverse experiences of assessment practices, different kinds of communication and interaction, and linguistic plurality.

Assessing students in a culturally diverse environment requires academics to be flexible and adaptable, and to understand cultural diversity in the global context.

When to use

In a cross-cultural university, issues are bound to arise. Mostly these will be based on misconceptions, (unintentionally) misleading categorisations and stereotyping. An us-and-them approach to students may develop, with academics viewing students' diversity as a problem rather than an opportunity.

Some examples of common misconceptions are that:

- Students with Asian backgrounds are rote learners with a surface approach to learning.
- Students from Confucian cultures do not offer their own critical perspective.
- Students with a Chinese background are unwilling to participate in class discussions.

Students may have developed different approaches to learning as a result of their prior learning experiences - but be cautious in generalising about certain groups. Students from a particular region or culture may share many characteristics, but don't assume them to be a homogeneous group (Trahar, 2007).

Issues can also arise around assessment. Usually this is because students and teachers have different expectations about behaviour and "rules", and perceive format and tasks differently. You can avoid some of these issues by giving students extensive and explicit guidelines regarding expectations and assessment regulations. Hold transition sessions, distribute detailed course outlines and incorporate such guidelines into the course teaching.

Benefits

Incorporate a variety of assessment tasks to help create a more inclusive learning environment (Pickford & Brown, 2007).

Even before you design assessment tasks in a culturally diverse classroom, make yourself aware of your own cultural underpinnings (Ryan 2005). Reflecting on your own context helps you appreciate some of the difficulties students can face with lecture style, tutorials or specific tasks. **This exercise in self-awareness** may help with this reflective process.

Diversity in the classroom poses challenges, but it also provides an authentic learning experience and a chance for all students to develop skills they will need in a globalised world.

Challenges

Because assessment is so crucial to students, they can find it frustrating to be uncertain of your expectations and unsure what they are required to do. For instance, international students who were high achievers in their home country may be alarmed to receive an average mark, fail a course or find that opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge are reduced. Unassisted, students may not realise what is expected of them, or that expectations are higher than they are accustomed to, until quite late in a course.

Students have difficulty handling assessment tasks for many reasons, including:

- unfamiliarity with marking systems and the assessment culture
- different expectations of required skills, based on different experiences with assessment
- different pedagogic paradigms, leading to different understandings of assessment
- lack of clarity about the target of the course and the intended learning outcomes
- communication style and language skill differences
- lack of local cultural knowledge.

To be fair and inclusive in your assessment practices, articulate your expectations and requirements in assessments clearly and repeatedly to your students, so that everyone understands what's being asked of them. You may have specified course or class learning outcomes, but your expectations in relation to specific tasks often remain hidden. "Much of the academic discourse," Entwistle (2002) points out, "remains implicit within the early years of undergraduate study, and so students can be left confused about what exactly is being required of them to earn good grades."

You can communicate and clarify expectations and requirements in various ways, for instance:

- hold induction seminars in which you communicate explicit expectations. Use background slides to help explain tasks, or invite a student from a higher semester to talk about expectations from a learner's perspective.
- disseminate a copy of assessment criteria electronically and in print
- hand out assessment rubrics to familiarise students with standards; see this page for **information on rubrics**
- re-state or refer to your expectations on assignment question sheets and on course websites
- explain in detail the purpose of each assessment
- explain the marking system in detail—that is, how marks will be allocated and what the given mark will mean. Some students may be unfamiliar with the system.
- indicate the proportion of marks you will allocate for language use (if English language proficiency is being

assessed).

You begin an inclusive assessment process when you design a learning program, and at the outset of the program. Build inclusiveness into the curriculum structure, and align it with the curriculum. See the following page for information on [assessing inclusively](#).

Strategies

Plan and design assessments to help students demonstrate what they have learned and to enable them to do their best.

At the beginning of the course, ask your students about their prior learning and assessment experience. This helps you anticipate the difficulties they may face with assignments. It also welcomes them, acknowledges the cross-cultural nature of the class and promotes interaction between students and awareness of the class's diversity.

When designing assessment tasks, consider the following criteria, for the purpose of building in fairness:

- Avoid setting demanding exams during major religious festivals.
- Include a variety of assessment tasks throughout the course; individual assignments and group work, online and/or in-class participation, exams etc. all have their place. You can also use portfolio assessment to implement a range of assessment tasks.
- Allow students to choose their own assessment task, provided it is aligned to the learning objectives; permit them to use a variety of media such as podcasts, websites, blogs, oral presentations or written work.
- Apply a progressive approach to the traditional essay or report writing assignment; for example, evaluate the first assignment for content, format and volume rather than expression, then gradually shift the balance towards improving expression.
- Weight a course's or a semester's assessment tasks in a balanced way; don't give any single assessment task too much weight.
- Be clear and concise when writing exam questions.
- Provide clear instructions; for instance, in the case of an exam, talk about how many questions students will have to answer, what each is worth and so on.
- Be fair when setting assignment questions; avoid advantaging specific groups by, for instance, relating your question to something where local knowledge is required.
- Set assignment tasks early in the semester, so that you find out about potential issues in time to resolve them.
- Design assessment tasks so that they don't require capabilities beyond the discipline knowledge, such as skills particular to a local culture.

Create an inclusive learning environment; students should feel that their contributions are valued, and that they have ample opportunities to participate. Inclusiveness does not imply simplifying the context; it means creating opportunities for all students to demonstrate their competence. All students need to gain a deep understanding of the subject and be adequately prepared for assessment tasks.

Below are various ways to address these issues.

Internationalise the curriculum

A diverse classroom provides an excellent learning ground for cross-cultural communication and understanding. When you internationalise the curriculum, you provide an authentic learning experience, promote contact between students and offer opportunities for all to develop an international perspective.

To internationalise your curriculum, you might consider doing the following:

- Incorporate international case studies, profiles, guest speakers, videos etc. into the curriculum.
- Use a variety of material, references and books that include an international or country-specific focus.
- Encourage students to apply theories in different contexts to highlight theoretical limitations and workability.
- Avoid case studies that involve subtle stereotyping—for example, situations in which local people occupy superior positions and non-local people occupy inferior ones.

Make assessments accessible

Pay close attention to the way you use language in lectures, tutorials and assessment tasks. Take care to:

- use clear language and be concise
- avoid or explain jargon, slang, unfamiliar expressions, ambiguity
- explain terminology and university-specific concepts clearly and without ambiguity
- provide a glossary of terminology and technical language
- include students in developing glossary and definitions and, if necessary, translations
- highlight the main points of a section of text or talk before moving on to the next
- record lectures and make them available online
- word questions clearly and unambiguously.

Preparation and practice

Prepare students for an assessment task by clarifying your expectations and requirements. For instance, distribute and discuss previous examination papers in class; this will encourage students to raise any concerns or issues they have about time constraints, required writing skills and gaps in their content knowledge.

Practising with previous essay questions will enhance students' language skills and use of sources, and will give you the chance to discuss plagiarism and critical thinking skills with them. Clarify what you mean by critical thinking. What kind of critical thinking is required in your discipline? Students can be unfamiliar with the concept, or have a quite different understanding about it from you.

Practise a variety of assessment tasks. For example:

- Incorporate activities that are relevant to assessment.
- Provide model answers for different types of answers (e.g. for exams), including models of answers that demonstrate different levels of proficiency.
- Set group work to prepare students for essay questions. Students can talk about the essay question to clarify its meaning, discuss different approaches to answering it, find sources that support their ideas.
- Provide informal questions with texts or essay assignments. Gradually increase their difficulty to develop students' critical thinking skills - start with terms such as "explain" and "describe" and move on to "evaluate" and "assess".
- Establish informal study groups or peer mentoring to discuss expectations, get peer feedback and so on.

Encourage group participation

Academics often assume that in cross-cultural environments students will be reluctant to participate in group discussion and/or group work. Often, however, this reluctance is not culturally related, but springs from a lack of confidence, or from uncertainty about expectations.

To encourage students' participation, first create a safe environment and avoid surprises - always inform students adequately beforehand about what is involved in any task, and topics that will be covered in discussion or any other activity. To stimulate participation, you could:

- Give students adequate time to prepare answers and discussion questions.
- Hand out questions for discussion for the next tutorial.
- Provide some reading material to help students prepare answers.
- Provide clear guidelines as to what "participation" means, as this is not always clear to students.
- Include international perspectives in the discussion, and make use of different experiences and backgrounds to further the discussion.
- Summarise discussion from time to time, and allow students to reflect on the points made so far.
- Use ice-breakers to encourage interaction between students - with "speed dating", for example, students have to find out something in a very short time about their peers; this can be also used to discuss content of the course.
- Allow students to discuss the class content in pairs.
- For group tasks within the classroom, assign a role to each member of the group (e.g. discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker).
- Use online tools to support in-class discussions.
- Learn students' names to create a positive and familiar environment.
- Be clear about how you are assessing students' contributions. If quality of contribution counts, do not reward quantity.

Feedback

Feedback is one of the most important elements of fair assessment practice. In your feedback to students about their work, offer clear direction as to how they can improve their performance.

- Give students constructive advice on how to write better essays or respond better to exam questions.
- Suggest improvements, and point out the main criteria for achieving a better outcome.
- After returning assessments, provide feedback in class, and discuss the class's performances and any general tips you have on how to improve them.

For further information see [Giving Assessment Feedback](#).

Additional support

Students who have recently arrived in Australia and/or come from different learning environments might need additional support. You might, for example:

- Offer a few extra tutorials to provide an opportunity to discuss common problems they're experiencing with tasks and understanding.
- Offer an extra weekly hour to discuss, for instance, assignment drafts or any questions students have about assessment tasks.
- Hand out—or post online—information about support services, including administrative support within the University.
- Invite an International student from a higher semester to talk to new students.

For further information [Diversity Toolkit](#)

Additional information

External resources

[The Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne](#) provides a variety of resources for teaching and assessment.

[Flinders University](#) provides a variety of resources on cross-cultural learning and teaching strategies. They contain suggestions to enhance inclusive practices and offer self-assessment tools.

UNSW resources:

- [The Learning Centre](#)
- [Nura Gili](#)
- [Student Development International](#)

Further readings

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