

Learning and Teaching

Designing Culturally Inclusive Classroom Environments

Staff and students at La Trobe University have a variety of ideas about what constitutes good learning and teaching. These ideas are influenced by their own culture and individual life experiences. Much of what we do in education is actually framed by cultural 'rules' that are often tacit. This includes the ways we teach and learn, the curriculum intent, design and content, and our attitudes and values about schooling and education. Therefore, as La Trobe is a very diverse community, many students and staff may find our educational environment a new and possibly challenging experience.

Culture is the basis of what people 'take for granted' or what they notice about others but is largely invisible to themselves. The invisibility of culture in educational settings can have unintended consequences. Despite the best of intentions, teachers and students might be unaware that what they say, do or teach in the classroom could seem strange or offensive to others. Sometimes doing what seems 'normal' may mean unintentionally excluding others from participating fully in the learning environment.

Thinking about culture

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and others' is noticing what you find surprising, or perhaps offensive, about differences in everyday behaviour between someone from a different cultural group and yourself. When this happens think about what cultural 'rules' the other person and you might be using (Carroll 2000).

Expectations about roles, responsibilities and relationships of teachers and students can vary. Consider the 'rules' as used by the student and the lecturer in this situation.

If the lecturer does not answer a student's questions in class, but asks the other students what they think, in my country we would think that teacher is poorly qualified or lazy. But in Australia this way of not giving the answer... is common in our class, even when the Professor is our teacher.
(3rd year Botany student from Thailand) (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, p1).

Sometimes doing what seems 'normal' may mean unintentionally excluding others from participating fully in the learning environment.

TIPS



Questions to Guide Reflection on Culture

What can I say about myself and my own culture?

- What national, ethnic or religious group(s) do I belong to? How does my teaching reflect this?
- What seems normal or strange to me? What sort of student/staff behaviour am I most familiar or comfortable with? What surprises or challenges me?
- What do I know about my student and staff colleagues?
- What experiences do I have as a result of studying/working in different cultures and how can I use this?
- What do I know about the cultural and education systems of my student and staff colleagues?
- How current/accurate is my information?

TIPS for Designing a Culturally Inclusive Learning and Teaching Environment

Introductions

- Set up an introduction system so that all students can get to know something about you, their class colleagues and the diversity of experience in the class.
- Ensure the content/activities you use in class values the experience of all your students.
- On your WebCT site talk about your approach to learning and teaching; include some information about your own cultural origin and any cross-cultural teaching/learning experience you may have had .
- Provide opportunities for students to introduce themselves to you and other students through online postings on WebCT.

Establish appropriate modes of address

- If you interact one on one with students, ask what form of address they prefer.
- Use inclusive language that doesn't assume Western name forms; e.g.
 - 'family' name, not 'last' name;
 - 'given' name, not 'Christian' name.
- Students from more formal educational cultures, where status differences related to age or educational qualifications are important, might be uncomfortable in addressing teaching staff by their given names. A compromise can be for students to use your title and given name e.g. Professor Marie', 'Dr Ivan'.
- If in doubt, ask.

See TIPS Leadership and Administration: Guidance on Naming Systems <http://latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

Make the class a safe place for all students

- Establish a classroom in which teachers and students demonstrate mutual respect.
- Manage behaviour that might stimulate 'classroom incivilities'.
Teacher incivility can include:
 - prejudice; and
 - neglecting the needs of individual students or groups of students.Student incivility can manifest as:
 - poor punctuality;
 - lack of preparation for or non-participation in classes;
 - disruption of classes;
 - distraction of teacher and fellow students; and
 - cheating.
- Establish inclusive class ground rules that safeguard against racism and harassment.
 - In small classes, guide students to negotiate their own code of conduct.
 - In larger classes, provide a framework and ask for student feedback and ratification of ground rules.
- Define how class members discuss issues, especially potentially sensitive issues. For example, 'People must have valid support/evidence for what they say' .

Appreciate the challenges and adjustment stresses

- When people live and work in a new culture, they may experience 'culture shock'. This is characterised by a series of phases influencing how people perceive and respond to others and events around them. **For further information, see General Information Folio 4: Understanding and Supporting People Experiencing Culture Shock** <http://latrobe.edu.au/cdip>
- Recognise that people for whom English is an additional language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture.

- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to 'talk down' or to talk simplistically to international students or local speakers of other languages if English is not their first language.

Treat diversity positively

- Avoid over generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative) e.g. 'All Asian students are quiet in class'.
- Don't expect any individual student to speak as a representative of his/her culture.
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource.
- Plan opportunities for all students to contribute input related to their own culture (but avoid making any student a cultural representative) .
- Structure groups and group work thoughtfully – carefully organised group activities can provide valuable opportunities for encouraging students to meet others in their class, to exchange ideas and opinions and to develop respect for alternative perspectives and values.

For further information, see General Information Folio 2: Culturally Inclusive Practice <http://latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

Establish clear expectations in the classroom

- Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work.
- Check that your students understand the Australian university context and what is expected of them.
- Clarify the format and purpose of the particular session type you are teaching and the type of student participation expected.
- Explain the written topic outlines, objectives and outcomes that are provided to students, checking that everyone understands.
- Teach appropriate citing, referencing and how to avoid plagiarism in papers. Provide relevant information and resource sessions if necessary. Ensure students are aware of the LTU website on plagiarism: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/plagiarism>
- Make your unit objectives and marking scheme quite clear. Let students know if the emphasis is on communicating information and ideas or on language accuracy.
- Sometimes students can be anxious about being penalised for poor English expression.

Developing a Checklist for Reviewing Your Teaching Practice

For information on 'Evaluation of Teaching' see the Academic Development Unit website.

This site contains guidelines and resources for evaluation of teaching, including peer review. The following questions can be used as a framework for developing a checklist to either monitor your own practice or as a peer review instrument.

- What strategies/methods do I use to establish an inclusive learning and teaching environment?
- Which strategies/methods work well?
- What evidence do I have that these strategies/methods are successful?
- Which strategies/methods do I need to modify?
- What new strategies/methods could I adopt?

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and others' is noticing what you find surprising, or perhaps offensive, about differences in everyday behaviour between someone from a different cultural group and yourself.

Reviewing Your Approach to Teaching

Where might you stand on the following statements?
 Do you have a fixed view or does it vary with the situation?
 Is your teaching consistent with your viewpoint?

Teacher role		
The teacher's role is to guide students toward independent learning, by encouraging self-directed learning and peer teaching and learning.	Your comments	The role of the teacher is to provide disciplinary expertise and to cover all the skills and knowledge that students are required to learn.
Student role		
Students are expected to develop expertise in the accepted disciplinary knowledge by the teacher's explanations and demonstrations.	Your comments	Students are expected to develop their own ideas by questioning and critique in what teachers present in class.
Academic role		
Good academic behaviour requires quoting recommended texts in order to demonstrate learning.	Your comments	Good academic behaviour includes understanding competing explanations of differing phenomena and formulating a theoretically defensible rationale for one's own opinion.
Tone of classroom interaction		
Classroom interaction should be informal, where teachers and students, converse on a first name basis as colleagues in the higher education environment.	Your comments	A degree of formality in class is important because students need to trust and respect teachers as they are the experts who will ultimately assess and grade student work.
The curriculum		
The curriculum is for an Australian university and therefore the content must be essentially Australian	Your comments	The curriculum is for a global environment and market and therefore care should be taken to ensure that the content, illustrative examples, theorists and readings reflect diverse world views.

References and Further Resources

- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching Students from Overseas: A Brief Guide for Lecturers and Supervisors*. Longman Cheshire, Melbourne
- Boice, R. (1996). *First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process*. Anker Publishing Company, Bolton, MA
- Carroll, J. (2000). *A Way of Thinking About Culture: An Exercise*. Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford
- Perry, W. G. (1999). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years: A Scheme*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.
- La Trobe University Assessment Policy <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/policies/>