
Teaching International Students

Improving learning for all

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Strategies for becoming more explicit

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This chapter focuses on practical strategies to help students adapt and succeed in their new surroundings. It stresses the importance of being as explicit as you can be with all students and especially with those coming from different learning and social cultures. Approaches suggested here can be helpful at any time in a student's university career but are especially important at the beginning.

Leask (2004) likens students' arrival at university to learning how to play a new game where success depends on figuring out the new rules, applying them, and 'winning' rewards such as good grades, positive feedback and a sense of confidence and competence as a learner. All students find learning the new university 'game' challenging but international students may be doing so in English, as a second, third or fourth language. British or Australian culture and communication styles may also be unfamiliar and in many cases very different from the home culture (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Some international students may not realise the 'rules' have changed and most will start out using behaviours and assumptions that have served them well as learners up to this point. This may mean encountering unpleasant surprises. For example:

- An American student who has always received very high marks does her best at a British university and her first coursework is returned with a mark of 50/100. How could she have earned only half the available marks?
- A Chinese student who has always viewed classrooms as places where you sat, listened and tried to make sense of what was being said by the teacher is asked in an Australian lecture to discuss a point with his neighbour. What is the point of talking to someone who does not know the answer either?
- A Greek student who has previously been rewarded for reading a textbook many times then reproducing its insights in an exam is stunned by a Canadian reading list containing 25 books. How can he cope with that task and three other courses suggesting the same number of books to read?
- A British student with good A levels goes back home after a term's work at a British university and asks, 'Why do my teachers keep asking about referencing my work and giving me bad marks? I got Bs at school.'

Often, when Western teachers are presented with examples like this, they accept that learning is culturally conditioned (see Chapter 2), but awareness of difference can turn to dismay. How can they as teachers familiarise themselves with students' backgrounds when their students come from dozens of different countries? As class sizes rise and workloads grow ever bigger, the chance of spending time with students shrinks. Even if teachers could spend time discussing ideas about learning and teaching, individual students may or may not be sufficiently aware of their own previous learning experiences to provide useful insights and, as Louie reminds us in Chapter 3, it would be dangerous to generalise from the views of one or two students.

I suggest another approach. Teachers can help students best by becoming more knowledgeable about their own academic culture. Once teachers can see their own academic culture as 'systems of belief, expectations and practices about how to perform academically' (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 77), they can start to offer explicit help to students who have chosen to learn in that academic culture. Many students will adapt to the Western academic culture without explicit help, of course, by picking up clues and using feedback, observation and implicit messages from teachers to check out their own assumptions. But many others will not. The less insightful and sensitive may not have the time or, in some cases, the confidence and support they need to gradually pick up the rules of the game. Success comes too late or at a very high price in terms of stress, work and worry. Such students will find explicit help vital, though everyone will probably welcome any help that means they can expend less time and energy trying to figure out 'the game' and more time on the content and skills of the programme itself.

Another significant benefit from becoming aware of one's own academic culture is that it allows more flexibility and choice. Once the system becomes visible, it is possible to move from assuming that international students will adopt Western academic values, to being clear about what can and cannot be adapted, so that it is possible for students to succeed as learners in the new academic culture.

It follows, then, that being explicit with students starts with being self-aware about one's own academic culture, or what Louie (Chapter 3) calls becoming 'meta-aware'.

Becoming self-aware

Some teachers (and indeed, some people) do not see themselves as carriers of culture, assigning that role only to their incoming students. They take for granted the correct way to behave in seminars, the structure of an essay, the appropriate way for students to interact with teachers, and so on. If teachers have only worked within one academic culture with others who share similar beliefs, such things do not seem to involve culture at all; they seem logical, normal and obvious. Only when one encounters someone with different views do one's own assumptions become obvious, sometimes acutely so. A colleague tells the story of how she never thought about buying her meat until she travelled in Sudan and met women

who were shocked that she frequented a butcher's shop. My colleague commented, 'I never thought of myself as serving dead meat until I saw their reaction'.

Some tutors and lecturers have experienced stepping outside the normal when they worked in other cultures or tried to be successful students in others' learning cultures. Some have tried to do themselves justice in a new language. The majority of Western academics, however, only encounter opportunities for making their teaching and learning assumptions visible through interacting with students and colleagues arriving from other social and learning cultures. This is not always a welcome opportunity.

We tend to react negatively when the culturally unexpected occurs (though, of course, pleasant surprises do happen). For example, people from the UK who travel to China often talk about how Chinese people deal with spitting. The experience can simply trigger disgust or it can make the UK traveller aware (perhaps for the first time) of his own, different spitting conventions through the surprise of encountering others with different views. I certainly was unaware of the strategies I internalised when growing up in the US for making a request, but I did notice (probably because the two communication styles were reasonably similar) how others reacted to what had previously been appropriate behaviour when I tried using it in Britain. British people, I decided, do ask others to do things but they ask differently. British reaction allowed me to both articulate my previous beliefs and begin to sketch out my assumptions about how to be acceptable (and hopefully, accepted) in the UK.

Many of the encounters between teachers and students are like the spitting, asking and butchering examples, i.e. situated at the more general level of cultural assumptions about communication styles, ways of negotiating, dealing with conflict, planning time, and so on. However, this chapter seeks to narrow the focus to specific beliefs and assumptions linked to learning.

Louie in Chapter 3 talks of 'stepping back' from cultures and trying to understand them as systems, noting 'This sensitivity comes with the ability to be critical of one's own culture while at the same time being empathetic with it' (p.24). Often, teachers talk about difference only as disappointment, rather than the sensitivity and empathy that Louie suggests. It is possible to elicit positive aspects of the differences international students bring as learners. Teachers mention international students' wider experience. Teachers often appreciate students' diligent work habits and respect for teachers and for learning. It is much more common, however, for hard-pressed lecturers to see international students as the negative expression of their own cultural values ('they never speak', 'they plagiarise', 'they want too much support', 'they take too much of my time'). Of course, some students (both international and domestic) are over-demanding. Some do cheat. Some withdraw into silence. But before blaming the student, it might help to first consider whether students are using old rules for a new game. Blame then becomes thinking about how to help students adapt and learn new skills to fit them for the new tasks they will meet in Western universities.

Noticing and using surprises

When British lecturers are asked, 'What do international students do that you don't expect from home students? Are there any unexpected behaviours?' lecturers mention behaviours such as:

- giving presents
- answering all my questions with 'yes'
- calling me Dr X even when I have said 'call me John'
- complaining about wasting time on seminars rather than me teaching
- handing in 4,000 words for an essay with a 2,500 limit
- writing very personal coursework with the main point on page 3 and lots of unnecessary background
- repeating verbatim my lecture notes in the coursework
- coming into my office after I have given the marks to argue loudly that I should give them higher marks – several times
- remaining silent in seminars even when I ask a direct question
- coming up after the lecture for a 1:1 discussion and seeming to expect me to stay for as long as it takes even though I said 'Any questions?' in the lecture
- deferring to my opinion even when a preference would be appropriate (e.g. Me: 'Which essay will you do as coursework?' Student: 'Please, you say')
- talking loudly in lectures

You can probably add your own experiences to the list, even if you have been teaching international students for long enough so that such events no longer actually surprise you. In each of the examples cited, it is likely that the student is using different 'rules' from their teachers. Often, this mismatch is interpreted negatively, so giving presents may be viewed as bribery, writing 1,500 extra words is seen as disorganised, arguing for a better mark is interpreted as pushy, talking in lectures is labelled as rude, and so on. A British or Australian teacher probably automatically assumes the behaviour has the same (unwelcome) meaning in an international student as it would have in a home student who acted that way.

Meta-awareness means moving beyond spontaneous first reactions to identify what you were assuming would happen – looking for the invisible normal 'rule'. One group of British teachers generated a list of 'surprises' then came up with these academic cultural 'rules':

- *Presents*: Presents are OK but only after the mark has been assigned. The present should be small and preferably disposable/edible. It is more common to send a thank-you card or note.
- *Word length*: Not negotiable and designates a maximum. Staying within the limit is evidence of self-organisation. More words are not a sign of hard work.
- *Seeking changes in marks*: This can be done but only if teachers disagree with each other, not in response to students' pressing for change.

- *Teachers' names:* Use the name suggested. Many teachers expect first names except in formal or public situations. Calling by first names does not signify friendship or imply an equal status between student and teacher.
- *Speaking in seminars:* British tutors tend to like students' active involvement and expect them to spell things out even if the teacher already knows it. Speaking is valued more than listening though speaking after listening and thinking is best. Students clarify their thoughts by speaking. Getting it wrong helps students see where they need to think differently.
- *Reproducing verbatim notes:* Modifying texts shows the student has understood. Students' work should be individually created. Tutor notes may be used as a resource for drawing personal conclusions but when used, must be cited.
- *Putting the main point of an essay on the third page:* Western writing is generally deductive, i.e. the main point comes first followed by background information and supporting arguments. Building rapport with the reader and providing background at the beginning is 'waffling'.

Not everyone in the group agreed about every point in this example but they did agree that a student behaving in the ways they described would progress through their classroom without notice or comment. A more interesting discussion centred on whether they as teachers had the right to ask for such changes and how they would cope should the student be unwilling or unable to adopt these new behaviours. I will return to this point at the end of the chapter, turning first to how teachers can help students learn Western academic cultural 'rules' and beliefs.

Being explicit

Once you become aware of cultural difference, you can re-interpret the student's previously negatively viewed behaviour, using a well-established technique sometimes called *cultural repair*. For example, 'repaired' thinking might be, 'This present is probably not a bribe; it probably arises from different ideas about gift giving.' Often, the best response is to keep 'repaired' reactions to yourself. However, there are times when it is helpful to give the other person information about your own academic culture because it is an important matter or because it would help the student to be more successful. Although studies have shown that students welcome specific guidance (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997), teachers often shy away from giving the student specific information about Western academic culture, perhaps because they are concerned about appearing patronising or of seeming to criticise students' previous experiences. A few lecturers hold back from being explicit because they believe learning to fit in is part of a student's task just as learning to figure out what an essay question means is part of the assessment. Some find being explicit too much effort due to frantic schedules, demanding workloads or even personal inclination.

Whatever the cause, a teacher's reluctance to explain may leave the student no option but to get it wrong, notice the consequences and decide what would have

been more appropriate – a painful and time-consuming learning strategy. It does not follow, however, that repeatedly and meticulously explaining everything to a student is either possible or helpful. Too much explicitness becomes overwhelming and stifles the student's own sensitivity and curiosity. Explanations, even explicit ones, contain significant amounts of tacit and implied knowledge so teachers need to select their opportunities and students will need time and experience and practice to make sense of any guidance.

Even statements that seem explicit, such as, 'Ensure your essay draws on a wide range of sources to support your argument' may still leave the student baffled as it includes tacit and shared knowledge. For example, what might constitute 'a wide range' or even what is an essay? The person giving advice might assume that writing is based on posing and defending a particular point of view. All these things might be new and perhaps strange ideas for many international students. By building in practice, feedback, a chance to see examples of good and poor work, and opportunities to try out new skills, students can turn this explicit advice into something that makes sense.

Given time and sensitive feedback, students can develop these skills themselves. Wisker (2003) talks about helping students to 'hang in there and keep going' through those difficult early months. A teacher's skill lies in knowing when to be explicit, how much to explain and what to be explicit about. If you are unsure where to start, four areas seem to hold the most difficulty for students new to the Western academic game. You could especially try to be explicit about:

- teaching methods;
- assessment;
- teacher–student relationships; and
- academic writing.

Being explicit about teaching methods

Many international students (and probably most home students) have spent years in systems where:

- teachers tell and students listen;
- students tutor each other outside class and co-operate in completing work, often copying each others' answers;
- tasks are highly structured and teacher-directed;
- there is lots of homework, tested orally in class;
- a high value is placed on knowing information and accessing it quickly but low value is placed on using information or evaluating it; and
- personal diligence (expressed as time on homework) is the norm.

What are the Western characteristics, expectations and assumptions that students moving from those types of learning environments might find strange or alarming?

How would reactions and behaviours such students might show in their new setting give you a clue as to how your own academic culture is different?

Students new to Western universities usually welcome explanations as to the purpose of lectures, or the benefits of discussion-based learning, or the link between out-of-class tasks (rather than structured homework) and independent learning. Students new to seminars would find it useful to be aware of what you value and/or expect. Do you generally prefer talking over listening, dialogue over reflection, and creativity over consensus and pragmatic solutions? Can you tell students how you expect them to behave in ways that will make sense to someone who does not share those views?

By observing your students and discussing their experiences, other issues may emerge. What lies behind the Western use of group learning? How are group tasks assessed? How is a student expected to structure his or her time in your university? What is supposed to happen in the library? You can doubtless generate many more questions.

Once you know what your assumptions are, it will help your students if you share with them some of those assumptions as explicitly as you can.

Being explicit about assessment

Often, it is not until the end of the first term when students submit an assignment and do badly that they realise their ideas about assessment may not match your own. Again, to know what to be explicit about, you need to look for what your international students struggle with then offer information. Spell out dates, times and deadlines; it generally takes international students much longer to accomplish tasks compared to domestic students. Students being assessed usually welcome explicit instructions on:

- the length of submissions (and the fact that longer is not better);
- the format (with explanations of what a report, poster, essay or précis might be and possibly a chance to try out new formats such as oral presentations and viva voces);
- what the assessment criteria mean and how they are applied;
- what is being assessed (especially the percentage of the mark allocated to English language proficiency); and
- which aspects of the assessment brief are compulsory and which are guidance or suggestions.

Because assessment is so central to academic culture, it helps to ensure information is conveyed in writing as well as through discussion, explanation or example.

Being explicit about assessment also includes thinking about feedback. Explicit, sensitive feedback acknowledges students' efforts and guides them to a more acceptable performance. Feedback that concentrates on what students have

not done ('confusing argument', 'no links') or that implies rather than states what is required ('Is this your own words?', 'What about the Hastings report?') is not helpful. It assumes the student knows the preferred behaviour, can decode the question, and could do what you suggest if they wished. This kind of feedback is rather like telling someone who is unskilled at Indian cookery how not to make a curry by writing 'coconut?'. Explicit feedback describes positive behaviour ('Put the main idea first then provide examples of how the idea would work in practice' or 'Tell the reader when you move from describing the method to discussing whether it is a good method or not' or 'If you are using someone else's words, you must enclose their words in quotation marks to show they are not your own words' or 'You should have referred to the Hastings report because it ...').

As a significant number of students often make similar mistakes based on similar assumptions, it is possible to assemble statement banks to streamline the task. Confine your comments to key points or essential information, especially in the early days, so as not to overwhelm students. Peer and self-assessment methods, perhaps in a workshop setting, can be useful ways to explore and clarify assumptions (Price *et al.*, 2001) if you and the students are clear as to the purpose of the workshop.

Being explicit about teacher-student relationships

Students' previous experience may have included:

- teachers as experts and authorities, providing answers;
- teachers acting as parental figures, guiding and being involved with the student as a person;
- teachers knowing students' problems and guiding them to solutions;
- teachers giving clear instructions on what students must do; and
- teachers being generally available to students out of class.

Students may behave as if these relationships will continue in the Western university and may welcome sensitive guidance on what they can and cannot expect from you as a teacher. When can they see you? What issues are appropriate to bring to a tutorial? If (as is usually the case in Western universities) students must ask for help if there are problems, how might the student learn to express their needs to teachers rather than expecting others to notice? If you see teaching as facilitating or organising students' learning rather than as providing answers, how can you help students see you in this new light?

A word about empathy

Differences are often deeply held beliefs rather than superficial matters of learning new table manners or ways of greeting others. Adapting and accepting new

ways will be hard for all students and may even be impossible for some. Teachers may need to be patient, sensitive and adaptable themselves as well as explicit with students attempting to adjust to Western academic culture. The more teachers are aware of their own culture, the more likely they are to be able to help international students adjust and thrive in the new academic culture they have (sometimes unwittingly) chosen to experience. Self-awareness also lets teachers be more flexible about what can be modified to allow students to show the same learning to the same standard but doing so differently. Once teachers are clear about which core values, beliefs and behaviours are essential elements of a Western university qualification, they know what can and cannot be adapted, what can and cannot be made optional, and what must be demonstrated by students wanting that qualification. Your explicit guidance will help all students progress towards those goals.

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'Lightening the load'

Teaching in English, learning in English

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Much of this book addresses ways that students adapt to and learn in different academic cultures. This chapter focuses on the fact that a significant proportion of international students' adaptation and learning in Western universities occurs in a new and perhaps unfamiliar language, English. In my own university, the 2003 statistics showed 40 countries had 'sent' 10 or more students. Looking down the list:

- 25 (62 per cent) were countries where students probably neither used English at home nor studied in the medium before enrolling in UK tertiary education
- 11 (27 per cent) were countries where students may have had some or all of their secondary schooling from teachers using English, either as a first or (more probably) as second language.

In the UK as a whole, the British Council listed the 20 countries that sent the most students (a total of 131,520) along with the number from each country. A quick look at the list showed:

- 65,790 (50 per cent) being from countries where English is unlikely to be the language of instruction
- 47,680 (36 per cent) from countries where English is probably the language of instruction but is not the students' or teachers' first language
- 14,365 (11 per cent) who are probably native English speakers, taught by native English speakers.

Source: British Council, 2003/4

Second-language lecturers in the Caribbean, India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, or the Lebanon may use a variation of English unlike the one students encounter in a Western university. Even native speakers find surprising and sometimes disconcerting differences when they move from one English-speaking country to another though this is a minor matter compared to those arriving with an untested and probably imperfect grasp of English.