

Presentation title: Bridging Cultures in the Classroom: Reflections on International Graduate Student Experiences in the U.S. Higher Education

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Introduction

International graduate students face challenges in U.S. classrooms beyond language and academics. Differences in communication, perceptions of authority, time, and personal space often lead to misinterpretations that hinder learning and participation (Lee & Rice, 2007; Hung, 2006). While learner-centered teaching (LCT) aims to address diverse needs, it frequently overlooks the sociocultural contexts that shape student behavior (Leask, 2015). This reflection examined how these differences play a role in classroom dynamics and supports inclusive teaching strategies based on personal and peer experiences.

Connection to Literature

This reflection draws on two intercultural frameworks that explain how cultural values influence learning and communication. The first, the Core Cultural Values and Culture Mapping model developed by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), contrasts value continua such as individualism vs. collectivism, directness vs. indirectness, and monochronic vs. polychronic time (Kappler Mikk et al., 2009). The second, Erin Meyer's (2014) Culture Map, introduces eight dimensions of cultural variation, including communication context, feedback styles, leadership, and time orientation. These frameworks were chosen to offer structured lenses for interpreting international students' adaptation experiences in U.S. educational settings.

How it works

As an international student from Rwanda and professor as a U.S. citizen, we collaboratively reflected on our educational experiences in the U.S., and we provided a description of culturally informed interactions and experiences, with supporting literature, and provided strategies as a teaching implication statement. We provide these examples to engage in dialogue about culturally informed experiencing in education and did not intend for these examples to be stereotypes of all people from specific cultures.

Implication

Communication and Feedback: In the U.S., instructors often soften constructive criticism with positive statements for example, "Good start", "You did well; just adjust a few things." In contrast, cultures such as those in Nigeria, India, and China tend to use more direct, critical feedback, reflecting a higher power distance between students and teachers (Hofstede, 1986; Hyun, 2019). Students from such cultures may interpret U.S. feedback as entirely positive and fail to identify areas for improvement (Hung, 2006). These differences in communication style also extend to how feedback is delivered. In my experience, Africans commonly exchange messages in Whatsapp group chats or make phone calls for quick coordination and feedback. Professors and students in the U.S., on the other hand, tend to use more formal communication channels, such as email, and often prefer asynchronous communication. Teaching Implication: Instructors can clarify expectations by including their communication preferences in the rubric, providing examples of excellent work. They may also explain typical U.S. feedback language and explicitly state that soft comments often carry suggestions for improvement.

Eye Contact and Authority: In Rwanda and many East Asian cultures, avoiding eye contact is considered a sign of respect, particularly when interacting with authority figures. This cultural norm can influence classroom dynamics for international graduate students, especially those from hierarchical societies where questioning or approaching a professor outside of class such as during office hours may feel inappropriate or disrespectful. In conversations with fellow international students, several expressed hesitation to attend office hours for this reason. In contrast, U.S. classrooms often interpret direct eye contact as a sign of engagement, confidence, and active participation (Meyer, 2014; Hung, 2006). As a result, students who avoid eye contact may be unintentionally perceived as disengaged or unmotivated, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness in cross-cultural academic settings. Teaching Implication: Faculty can demonstrate cultural awareness by explicitly clarifying that asking questions is not only acceptable but encouraged. Participation policies should be flexible enough to recognize culturally informed behavior. Professors might also share that office hours are informal and open, helping students reframe them as learning spaces rather than power encounters.

Time Orientation: Time orientation also varies across cultures. In most African countries, including Rwanda culture, a polychronic approach to time allows for flexibility, and being slightly late is generally acceptable. Conversely, U.S. culture tends to follow a monochronic time orientation, emphasizing strict punctuality (Hall, 1983). Based on my personal experiences, I have observed that many American students tend to be very time-conscious and are often ready to leave promptly when the scheduled time is up. For example, if a meeting is scheduled for one hour and there are still tasks remaining, they typically do not offer prior notice or ask if the meeting can be extended; instead, they simply state, "I'm leaving," and depart. In my culture, this behavior might be considered abrupt or even impolite, as we often remain flexible with time, especially if we are in the middle of completing important tasks. Personally, I am usually willing to stay longer if needed, unless I have another urgent commitment. I understand, however, that in

the American context, this punctuality reflects a cultural norm that values time management and respecting set schedules.

In addition, after speaking with other graduate students, particularly international students I learned that many feel a strong sense of obligation to accept invitations from American colleagues, whether for events, lunch, or dinner, even when they may already have other commitments. They often try to make themselves available out of concern that declining an invitation might come across as disrespectful or offensive. This same sense of responsibility may also explain why some international students respond to emails at any time, including late at night, as they want to show respect and responsiveness, even at the cost of personal convenience. It is usually shocking to hear American students bluntly decline an invitation by simply saying: “I am sorry, I have other appointments” One challenge I encountered was adapting to the U.S. appointment-based system, which contrasts with Rwanda’s more flexible but time-consuming approach of showing up without notice; although initially stressful, I’ve come to appreciate the structure and predictability it offers. Teaching Implication: Early discussion about cultural approaches to time can minimize frustration within instructor-teacher relationships. Instructors can explain the value placed on punctuality while inviting students to share their own cultural views, promoting mutual understanding.

Nonverbal Communication and Personal Space: In Rwandan cultures, close proximity during conversation communicates warmth and connectedness. American cultural norms, however, tend to value personal space and individual autonomy (Rosenbaum, 2018). Early in my experience, I interpreted physical distance from U.S. classmates as coldness and indifference. Similarly, facial expressions, hand gestures, and tone of voice vary and can be easily misinterpreted. Teaching Implication: Icebreakers and small group activities can help students become familiar with cultural differences in nonverbal behavior. These activities may reduce non-verbal miscommunication. Simple discussions about personal space or greeting norms can also make students more aware of hidden cues.

Broader Cultural Challenges: Although written English is often clear, accents in spoken English can hinder comprehension. In one class, I struggled to understand a professor who dropped the “t” in words like “internet” or “international.” I realized that these challenges affect both students and professors and can lead students to suppress their cultural identity in an effort to fit in. Cultural misunderstandings may also contribute to perceptions of discrimination, mental health stigma, and underuse of support services (Lee & Rice, 2007). Teaching Implication: One-time orientation sessions are not enough; institutions must commit to ongoing intercultural support and learning. Faculty can play a role by normalizing accent diversity and reminding students that seeking clarification is part of the learning process.

Strategies for Inclusive Teaching: Inclusive teaching can be supported through the use of cultural mapping exercises (Kappler Mikk et al., 2009). Instructors can adopt multimodal platforms like WhatsApp or Canvas to enhance communication (Goodroad, 2020). Providing

clear rubrics and examples helps clarify expectations (Hyun, 2019). Offering alternative participation options accommodates different communication styles (Zhang, 2016). Pairing domestic and international students in mentorships fosters cross-cultural understanding (Jensen & Jetten, 2015). Faculty training in intercultural communication is essential (Leask, 2015). Additionally, applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) helps address diverse learner needs.

Conclusion

Implementation of these inclusive teaching practices can lead to increased comfort and engagement among students. Domestic students can also benefit and have increased curiosity about other cultures and help them improve their interpersonal communications. While anecdotal, the outcomes that were highlighted in this reflection demonstrated the need for intentional, culturally responsive teaching. By integrating intercultural theory with lived experience, educators can transform classrooms into inclusive, dynamic learning environments.

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