Supporting International Students in the Classroom
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International students have increased at UW for the third year in a row by 17% to total 749 students in 2009-2010 (343 undergraduate; 406 graduate and professional students). International students are a tremendous benefit to the classroom as they bring cultural, political, and economic knowledge and experiences that enrich the learning of the entire class.

Class Discussion & Group Work

Not surprisingly, international students are often hesitant to participate in class discussion because of their insecurities with the English language or fears of speaking inappropriately about the topic under discussion. In addition, students' cultural norms may lead to confusion about expectations for discussion in the American classroom. For example, students from some Asian, European, and Latin American cultures may think that it is disrespectful to look at the instructor directly while she or he is speaking, to pose challenging questions to the instructor, or to differ with the instructor's opinion ("International Students"). Some may believe they must be called upon in class to offer their thoughts. The following suggestions can help international students understand the norms of classroom discussion and feel more comfortable participating:

- Offer to meet (or set up conferences) with international students in the first few weeks of the semester. Ask them about the cultural norms they bring with them in relation to class discussion, the topics under consideration, and the course assignments, projects, or exams. Explain your own expectations and hopes for class interactions and course objectives. Keep in mind that some international students would benefit from hearing that it is acceptable for them to disagree with the teacher (and then respond positively if a student offers a challenge).

- Provide lead-time for students to form a response before asking international students to speak in class—through talking with a partner, writing down a couple thoughts, or pre-briefing students about questions that will be discussed in the next class. An on-line discussion forum can also be very helpful for international students to develop and polish responses.

- If an international student makes an unclear remark, re-state their comment before continuing ("so you are saying that…") to allow the student to correct you and to allow other students to engage with the comment. If the response is too difficult to decipher, ask the student to rephrase; as a last resort, simply thank the student for their comment.

- Avoid asking international students to contribute openly in discussion when the goal is to critique; students may feel they are inappropriately criticizing another person's opinions.

- When assigning group work, keep in mind that multicultural groups may move more slowly as they work through cultural differences and learn to communicate with each other effectively (Carroll 2002). Be sure to highlight the benefits of cross cultural perspectives in the work, and assess the process along with the product of the group. Keep in mind that group work may be a new process for some international students, and a familiar one for others (e.g. Korean students tend to have extensive experience with group work and may even find it difficult to work independently).

Assignments & Feedback

One of the best pieces of advice for supporting international students is simply to keep these students in mind when writing assignment descriptions and exam questions. We are often unaware of idioms (such as "up a creek," "hit the books," etc.) that may throw international students off. Assignments that rely on native familiarity with topics involving government, history, popular culture, or education can prove a monumental task for a student who has little to no background knowledge of the issue. Be very explicit in giving instructions and try to model brief examples in the prompt when possible.

- Use detailed written instructions as well as spoken for all high stakes work in the class. Asian students in one study, for example, were not able to perform well when assignments relied heavily on verbal explanation (Horwood 1991).

- Discuss and "decode" the language of written instructions with the entire class, paying attention to possible areas of confusion including differences between tasks such as "summarize," "justify," or "analyze" (this discussion will likely help all students in the class).

- Be aware of possible confusion or discomfort among international students when dealing with political or cultural issues; students might adhere to their own cultural "rules" in responding to topics they perceive to be highly sensitive. International students can particularly struggle with developing original arguments rather than reporting information; they may need help understanding how to use critical thinking in developing a new viewpoint.

- Ask international students (in conference or after class) to describe the assignment as they understand it—this will help you clarify confusions. Be cautious about simply asking if students understand the assignment. Many cultures' conversational norms involve nodding in response to all types of statements, and a nod may not indicate comprehension.

Writing & Research

Keep in mind that many cultures use different organizational structures for writing that differ from the thesis-based structures taught in American schools. International students' writing may be characterized by abstract and passive constructions that (intentionally) obscure a direct presentation of ideas ("International Students"). In addition, some cultural differences affect females more than males. Some suggestions for helping students adapt to American writing conventions include

- Talk to international students about the thesis-driven structure and provide models. Some students may be uncomfortable with a thesis-driven organization or new formats for business communication. Reassure students that using a new structure is not implying that their familiar style is "wrong," but that it is a mark of true scholarship to learn the conventions of a different context/culture. Let students know that they have permission to express their ideas directly, especially when it comes to politically sensitive topics.

- Help international students understand the nuances of citation and plagiarism. In some countries, such as China, there is no protection of ideas with patent or copyright laws, and students do not understand the concept of "owning ideas." If you suspect plagiarism, meet with the student and ask about their process in writing the assignment. Use instances of unintentional plagiarism to help students learn our cultural conventions for citing.

- Comment on the "meaning" and organization of students' writing first before marking errors in grammar and style. International students will gain fluency with practice and time, and an overemphasis on grammar can instigate a strong fear of errors that inhibits students' ability to express ideas.

- Be aware that international students won't be able to correct every error within one course. Set up a hierarchy of grammatical issues and decide on those that you will address in the course. Limiting the scope will allow the student to see progress and practice more effectively. Also, keep in mind that articles such as "a," "the," "an," etc. have complicated rules that international students will only learn through practice and long-term exposure to the language. Over-emphasis on article use may be counter-productive and should not in most cases play a strong role in the final assignment grade.

References

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