

# Unleashing the Power of Diversity on Student Learning

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## 1. Understanding Diversity

Student diversity in higher education contexts has often been associated with cultural and ethnic identity. The internationalisation of higher education and the increasing mobility have indeed brought a higher level of cultural and ethnic diversity to our classroom. While acknowledging these aspects of diversity, we believe that understanding diversity beyond culture and ethnicity will possibly generate more benefits to student learning. This is because acknowledging various sources of diversity allows us to maximise our opportunities to learn multiple perspectives and engage in meaningful exchange of ideas (Lee, Williams, & Kilaberia, 2012). We therefore see diversity in our classrooms as accommodating and recognising students with different personalities, learning styles, life experiences, as well as race/ethnicity, gender, country of origin, and religion (Clayton-Pedersen et al., 2009).

Cultural diversity as one of these forms of diversity has received much attention because the internationalisation agenda in many universities has brought more non-local students to our classrooms. It is noteworthy that cultural diversity in the classroom has been argued as a “double-edged sword”. If well managed, it can offer students some valuable opportunities for active learning and the achievement of international and intercultural learning outcomes. Otherwise, it probably results in increased tension, frustration or even reinforcement of prejudices among students (Ramburuth & Welch, 2005).

In this briefing, we will discuss principles and practices of leveraging diversity and making use of it as a resource to enrich students’ learning experiences. Following our broad definition of diversity, we do not confine our discussion to cultural or ethnic diversity but present suggested practices of the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with various forms of diversity. We devote Section 2 to discussing intercultural collaboration because of its importance in addressing the broad diversity issues. Sections 3 and 4 deal with general strategies for engaging with diversity beyond cultural aspects. Case examples shown in this briefing were collected from The University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Hong Kong Baptist University by interviews and discussions. References in the literature are also cited to illustrate some of the principles.

## 2. Fostering Intercultural Collaboration

Preparing students for intercultural communication can be difficult since intercultural relations are linked with intergroup tensions (Tran & Pham, 2015). When international students are situated in different “discourse systems” where “cultural toolkits” such as ideas and beliefs about the world are so different (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.7), the different respective codes therefore inevitably increase the likelihood of difficulties in communication (Fox, 1997). However, it is also such diversity which potentially opens the door to students of all cultural backgrounds to grow and learn together. Teachers may capitalise on the diversity to facilitate cross-cultural learning in and out of the classroom.

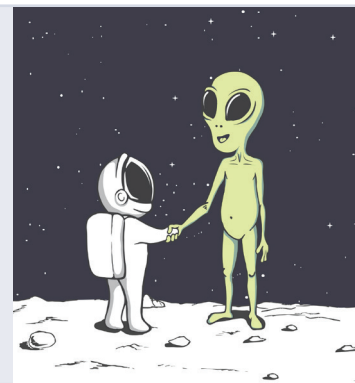
### A. Creating Opportunities for Interaction

One way to capitalise on the diversity is to create more opportunities for students to enrol in activities that facilitate their understanding of diversity in order to enhance students’ confidence in interaction and civic participation (Denson & Bowman, 2013). For example, a teacher from our community of practice incorporates a game called *the Alien’s View* into her China Studies course. Students of different origins are asked to introduce a self-selected past event to the ‘alien’ who has no contextual knowledge of the event. By comparing and contrasting peers’ perspectives, students identify what the facts are and what opinions they are trying to make. In this activity, students are given some structured opportunities to learn from and with each other, through which they enhance the sensitivity to deal with diversity and differences (see the case example of Kim).

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### What are some benefits of using the *Alien's View* in this classroom activity?

Putting students in a different and unfamiliar scenario, such as talking with an 'alien', will create a new learning environment where they have a relatively equal ground to practise. Students with different levels of intercultural interaction competence are given opportunities to make meaningful contributions because no one has an advantage in communicating with an 'alien'.



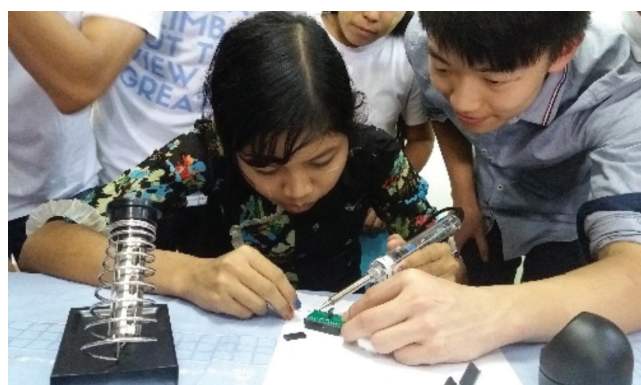
### B. Nurturing Meaningful Engagement

Acknowledging the fact that creating opportunities for interaction (*what to do*) is important, teachers can take one step further and devise ways that allow students to involve in reciprocal and meaningful engagement (*how to do*). Teachers can motivate students to be the co-constructors of knowledge through mutual learning processes (Tran & Pham, 2015). Collaborative tasks are a case in point. Student participants in the joint workshops on design for sustainability work on a complex global issue in a culturally and ethnically diverse team, accommodate and make sense of each other's views, and come up with a possible solution (see the case example of Li). In terms of intercultural interaction, it is accentuated that deep and quality engagement weighs more than shallow and frequent interactions (Denson & Bowman, 2013).



### A. Solving Complex Tasks Together

Asking students to learn how to learn from and with students of different backgrounds are significant. However, "[p]lacing people in the same room, seating them together, telling them that they are a group, and advising them to 'work together', does not mean that they will work together effectively" (Johnson & Johnson, 2005, p. 137). Peer learning opportunities therefore require a purposeful design and on-going management. In particular, structuring complex tasks which involve different skill sets and multiple perspectives can bring out the best of the synergy in peer learning (De Vita, 2002). Working in a multinational, multicultural and multidisciplinary group, students in an experiential learning project on wastewater treatment had to identify real-world problems locally and globally, conducted field trips for getting first-hand evidence, and generated possible solutions to the identified socio-environmental issues (see the case example of Chui). By approaching a complex cooperative task in their negotiated way, students are given the opportunity to develop a better understanding on how to work with peers with different learning styles and needs (Bowden & Marton, 1998).



## 3. Structuring Peer Learning

The term "peer learning" suggests a reciprocal learning activity that enables participants to share knowledge, ideas and experience with each other. It is a process by which students move themselves from independent to interdependent learning (Boud, 1988; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001). Developing skills in collaboration with others to achieve a common goal becomes essential for making sense of an increasingly hybrid world.



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### What tasks are complex?

It is sometimes difficult to determine the level of complexity of a task. If a task is too complex that individual contributions are completely unidentifiable, the likelihood of students free-riding might increase. If a task is too simple that students can easily divide their work and combine it at the end, they may miss a valuable collaborative learning opportunity. Davies (2009) suggests that the tasks are better to be additive in nature, meaning that each member of the group adds something to the task and that there are inputs from each group member forming a composite whole. Moreover, the outcomes and the assessment should be made as explicit as possible (Davies, 2009).



### B. Understanding Assessment Literacy through Peer Feedback Training

Feedback is an essential component to improve the quality of peer learning. Having students take part in dialogic feedback would sensitise their understanding of what makes a good performance and further allow them to identify areas for improvement. While receiving feedback is important, research showed that giving feedback to peers has a more significant impact on student learning (Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). Through peer feedback interchange, students have to reason their decision and help others construct an understanding of assignments, with the caveat that student diversity may increase the complexity in giving and receiving feedback. For example, cultural differences can lead to different reactions to the same piece of feedback. Some students may welcome a direct comment but some may feel offended or take it personally. Therefore, peer feedback training enables high-quality peer learning which helps students take each other's learning to the next level. In class, teachers can show students exemplars of previous cohorts and discuss with them issues that might arise in relation to assessment such as interpretations of the task and grading criteria. Students may then be given multiple opportunities to work on formative tasks within a given class or cohort. While students have such opportunities, giving concrete and constructive feedback takes time and practice. With practice and teachers' scaffolding, students as *feedback givers* and *receivers* could familiarise themselves with the standards through peer review in the hope that they are able to imbue their work with requisite qualities.

Teachers can make use of student-generated cases which help develop students' cross-cultural competence. One example is that teachers can consider asking students to introduce their full name (to someone next to them) and explain what it means in their lingua franca (such as English) (Leask, 2018). After students speak about themselves, teachers can have students explain things in their own language and see how language and culture come into play. Another example is that in one Sociology class, students are required to complete a worksheet about positive and negative expressions of sexually active men and women in their native language. Unsurprisingly, there are a considerable number of positive expressions of sexually active men and negative expressions of sexually active women across different discourse systems (see the case example of Groves). Students were debriefed after the learning activity and encouraged to reflect on how discourse and perceptions play out within and between cultures and nations. It is noteworthy that such a new source of cases and examples emanating from the lived experiences and shared ideologies of the students could advance the learning of all others (also see the case example of Guo & Chase).



## 4. Using Diversity as a Resource

Rather than seeing international students as a group of students that need additional help, teachers can attempt to blur the boundary between groups by engaging students in seeing diversity as an asset and showing them that it is the diversity that makes an individual unique (see the case example of Bodycott, Mak & Ramburuth). Our identity cannot be compartmentalised but is one made up of all other components (Suleiman, 2006).



## 5. A Checklist of Leveraging Diversity to Create Better Learning Experiences for All

We summarise our main points in the following checklist to provide a handy reference for teachers who wish to leverage diversity in their classrooms to create better learning experiences for all students.

- ✓ Have you tried to understand your students and their diverse backgrounds, including culture, ethnicity, prior experiences, personalities, and learning styles?
- ✓ Have you designed meaningful and complex tasks in which students can engage?
- ✓ Have you maximised the opportunity for students to learn from their peers?
- ✓ Have you made use of diversity as a learning resource?
- ✓ Have you prepared students to engage in critical dialogue with people from different backgrounds?
- ✓ Have you developed students' assessment literacies in peer learning?
- ✓ Have you respected individuals for their opinions while being cautious not to ask someone to speak on behalf of their social group or culture?

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## Leveraging Students' Diversity

### Case Examples

#### CASE 01

#### **SINO2001 China in the World – From Sinology to China Studies (China Studies, HKU)**

At course level, the teacher brought in both Chinese and English learning materials so that students could leverage different perspectives and expand their linguistic repertoire of discussion. With diversity in the classroom, including local Hong Kong, Mainland China and international students, the teacher generally applied randomisation for pairing and group work as well as assigning local buddies to international students. One way to help students develop intercultural competence was through a game called the *Alien's View*. First, students had to select a past or present event. Then they needed to communicate this event with the 'alien' as if it was someone who had no contextual knowledge and who would not make them embarrassed. Through such an activity, students would be able to identify what the facts were and what opinions they were trying to make.

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#### CASE 02

#### **Engineering Students Tackling Real-World Challenges in Myanmar (Engineering, HKU)**

Partnered with Dagon University, the wastewater treatment in Myanmar was chosen as the site of investigation. Students from different disciplines within the Faculty of Engineering were required to conduct knowledge exchange workshops at HKU in order to solidify their own disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning and to help their local and overseas peers realise their potential to absorb information. Upon arrival in Myanmar, engineering students were paired up with local science students. They worked as a team to collect wastewater samples from industrial plants, agricultural fields, underground wells, freshwater ponds and sewage drainage. Science students were then responsible for preparing the instruments for the experiments while engineering students designed hardware components such as pressure sensors and display monitors. The "Teach to Learn" concept has benefited students' learning and enabled them to gain necessary skills in a real engineering design cycle.

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#### CASE 03

#### **Meaningful Engagement in the Joint Workshop on Design for Sustainability (Computer Science, HKBU)**

The Department of Computer Science at HKBU organise the Joint Workshop on Design for Sustainability annually to bring together students of HKBU, Kyoto University, and National Cheng Kung University to sort out possible solutions to some unresolved issues in the Hong Kong society. In the workshop, participants of diverse levels and disciplines were first offered fully subsidised trip(s) to Japan and/or Taiwan to learn about case handling in different cultural contexts. They then worked in groups to design solutions and presented their findings in Hong Kong. It was a unique experience for students to recognise how people acknowledge, negotiate, and accommodate cultural differences. Other overseas attachment opportunities for students in the Department included a summer workshop on mobile app design, summer internships in Italy as well as a summer research programme in McGill University in Canada.

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#### CASE 04

#### **Raising Local and Global Awareness in Sociology Classes (Social Science, HKUST)**

The teacher has been dedicated to developing local and global awareness in students through a variety of strategies. To increase students' local awareness, he asked students to go into old neighbourhoods, interview shop owners and residents about how the neighborhood has changed, and look at different old Cantonese popular cultures. Students were able to have the first-hand experience in learning and appreciating the stories of the old Hong Kong and ethnic minorities. To increase students' global awareness, the teacher started with the students themselves and asked them to explain things in their own language. In one gender class, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire by filling in the terms for sexually (in)active males and females in their mother tongues. Through such an activity, students were prompted to reflect critically on the social actions and perceptions within and between discourse systems, cultures, and nations.

① Groves, J. (2018, May). *Internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC): How can we integrate global and local dimensions?*. CoP – ITL Join-the-Conversation event presented at Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.

**CASE  
05****Internationalising the Student  
Experience Project  
(University of Canberra, Australia)**

The project aimed to raise the cultural awareness of academic staff, students of the host society and incoming students around the world through alliance building and cultural mapping tools. Alliance building was to promote appreciation and understanding of students' cultural originals and personal experiences. Students were asked to play the Name Game which involved students working in pairs and sharing the meanings of their names. They would then introduce each other in a larger group while the students being introduced wrote their names in their native written language on the board. Cultural mapping was to offer students a framework to describe micro-behaviours (both verbal and non-verbal language) in intercultural interactions. Students were encouraged to seek help and ask for advice from academic and professional staff about using the cultural mapping.

① Bodycott, P., Mak, A. S., & Ramburuth, P. (2014). Utilising an internationalised curriculum to enhance students' intercultural interaction, engagement and adaptation. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23, 635–643.

**CASE  
06****Creating Transnational Learning  
Experience  
(University of British Columbia, Canada)**

The Professional Development Programme for International Teaching Assistants (PDITA) was designed to help smooth out the transition of international graduate students to Canada's learning environment. The programme focused on student integration, cross-cultural communication and effective teaching strategies. In particular, when it came to cross-cultural communication training, facilitators introduced readings and activities to critically evaluate some normative assumptions of culture and cross-cultural communication. The use of a popular simulation activity, the Barnga game, was a case in point. Students representing 36 countries and 54 disciplines were invited to discuss their personal cultural experience in class and generated untapped resources in the internationalisation of course content that could benefit all students.

① Guo, S., & Chase, M. (2011). Internationalisation of higher education: integrating international students into Canadian academic environment. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(3), 305–318.