

# Teaching across Cultures: Issues, Strategies and Actions

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“... cultural diversity in the classroom is a ‘double-edged sword’<sup>1</sup>. ”

## Introduction

The classroom today becomes more and more culturally diversified due to the globalisation of the higher education sector and the increasing student mobility. The high level of diversity, on the one hand, may create unprecedented opportunities for student learning. Frequent interactions between international and domestic students could potentially facilitate the development of cognitive skills, communication skills, and cultural awareness<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the diversity can generate tensions and uneasiness for both teachers and students. Cultural diversity in the classroom therefore needs to be carefully managed.

This briefing discusses the key issues of teaching across cultures and introduces five principles regarding how to transform cultural diversity into valuable learning opportunities. It also draws on the insights obtained from informal interviews with thirteen teachers from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) about their experiences of teaching culturally diversified classes. The teachers involved were teaching at least one Common Core course when they joined the study. The Common Core Curriculum is designed to provide broad and intercultural experiences for HKU undergraduate students<sup>3</sup>. Common Core courses are open to undergraduates of all majors, resulting in classrooms with over 120 students from different backgrounds in many courses.

## What Makes it Challenging to Teach across Cultures?

Cultural diversity embraces not only the cultures from different world civilisations across different societies but also cultures or subcultures within a society, which could originate from different ethnicities, religions, classes, genders, generations, religions, living conditions, and sexual orientations<sup>4</sup>. Cultural diversity among students has a significant impact on teaching and learning. A number of examples and scenarios are shown below.

### *Differences in Expectations of the Role*

Regarding the role of teachers and students in the classroom, Zhao and Bourne<sup>5</sup> describe a scenario that vividly reflects the different expectations between a British teacher and a Chinese student (see Figure 1). Their study was situated in a Master class in UK with non-local students from China. Gaps in expectations of roles can also be found between students from different cultures, which often influence their collaboration and groupwork.

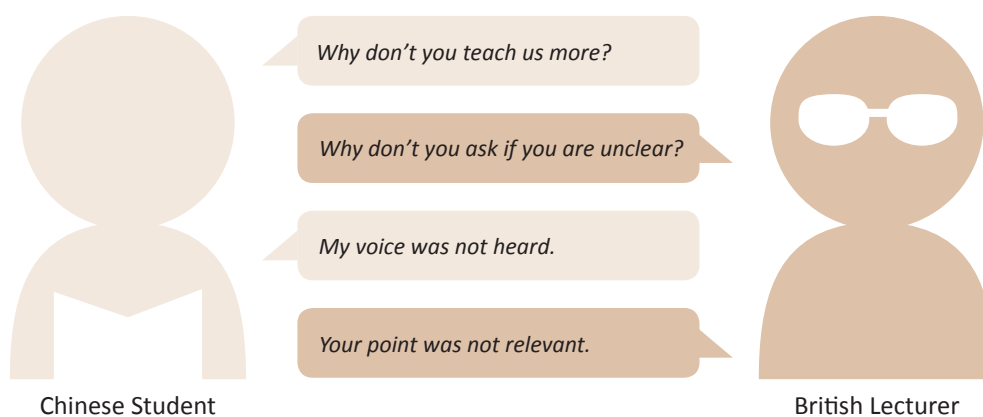


Figure 1. Gaps in expectations (see Note 5)

## Language Barriers

Language can be a potential barrier to teaching across cultures. The use of certain expressions such as idioms and slangs by local teachers and students could be unfamiliar to international students and thus creates misunderstanding<sup>6</sup>. The accent and use of different expressions of international students could also negatively affect their interactions with local students<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the language issues of some international students are often likely to result in other study problems, for example, difficulties in writing essays<sup>8</sup>.

## Different Social Norms

Students from different societies have different social norms, which could lead to different behaviours in the classroom. Failures in acknowledging these differences might cause misunderstanding about the performance of students. Chanock argues that students from Confucian-heritage cultures often restrain from challenging the authority<sup>9</sup>. For example, they are less likely to openly criticise books or journal articles which they perceive as wisdom from authorities. Teachers from other cultures may regard these manners as lacking of engagement or originality.

## Strategies for Teaching across Cultures

Various good practices of teaching across cultures are recommended in the literature. For example,

- Six principles outlined by Leask and Carroll<sup>10</sup>: focusing on students as learners; respecting and adjusting for diversity; providing context-specific information and support; enabling meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement; being adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence; and preparing students for life in a globalised world.
- The development of intercultural perspectives emphasised by Arkoudis<sup>11</sup>: encouraging effective communication with students from diverse cultural backgrounds; and developing students' skills to be able to work at any places in the world.
- Characteristics of cultural responsive teachers defined by Jabbar and Hardaker<sup>12</sup>: acknowledging multiple perspectives; showing an affirmative attitude towards diversity; acting as an agent of changes; promoting learners' knowledge construction; trying to understand students' lives; and building on students' existing understanding.

With different terminologies, these good practices all promote a student-centred learning environment and intercultural learning opportunities. Generally there are five common principles for teaching across cultures. For each principle, the rationale is explained, the recommended actions are listed, and the practical examples that we found at HKU or elsewhere are discussed.

## Principle 1:

### Accommodating and Respecting Diversity

Culturally diversified classrooms have the potential to offer unprecedented opportunities for both teachers and students to develop intercultural competence, which needs to be based on a sound understanding of at least two cultures, including one's own<sup>13</sup>. It is the teachers' responsibility to create an inclusive environment that accommodates diversity and exposes all students to multiple angles and alternative worldviews<sup>14</sup>. Recommended actions include:

- Making an effort to understand all students' cultural and educational backgrounds and prior learning experiences
- Inviting students to share their life and work experiences as inputs for classroom discussions and possible learning resources
- Helping students see and appreciate multiple perspectives
- Encouraging students to challenge established worldviews and explore alternatives

#### BOX 1

#### Examples of accommodating and respecting diversity

- **A student profile survey** about students' background and their prior understanding was administered to all students in the first class in one Common Core Course at HKU. The results provided a better understanding of students' perceptions and informed their prior knowledge on the topic.
- **Students' sharing of their thoughts and feelings about certain practices** was encouraged in a number of Common Core Courses. In one course, students' sharing of thoughts and feelings was used as subsequent discussion points. In another course, students were given sufficient time to think about the topic during the tutorial, for example, a 10-minute self-reflection, and then invited to share their thoughts in a small group.



## **Principle 2: Providing Clear Instructions and Specific Support**

One challenge of teaching across cultures, as illustrated by Figure 1, is related to the different expectations of teachers and students of each other's role. Providing clear instructions and specific support can make the expectations more transparent so as to reduce ambiguity. Teachers may consider repeating key points and asking students to indicate from time to time if they are following or have any questions about the instructions<sup>15</sup>. Recommended actions include:

- Highlighting important points and making them readily accessible (e.g., through learning management systems)
- Offering specific support to students according to their needs and experiences
- Clarifying expectations, intended learning outcomes, and criteria of assessment
- Providing exemplars and encouraging students to raise questions about the exemplars.

### **BOX 2** Examples of providing clear instructions and specific support

- **Providing clear instructions and early support to students with fewer essay writing experiences.** In one Common Core course at HKU, the teachers noticed that students had different prior experiences regarding essay writing. They gave students clear instructions on the main goals with essential components of the assignment and offered guidance regarding how to formulate and articulate arguments.
- **Scaffolding critical thinking skills for students with a tendency to conform to the authority.** In one Common Core course at HKU, the teacher tried to help students overcome the tendency to conform to authority by giving examples of how established viewpoints might be challenged. The teacher showed the process of analysing existing solutions to a science problem and encouraged students to further think about why some science problems still remained unsolved.

## **Principle 3: Facilitating Meaningful Intercultural Interaction**

In many classrooms, it is not uncommon to see 'international sticking together', meaning that international students tend to group with other international students for discussions and assignments<sup>16</sup>. The lack of meaningful interactions between international and local students could severely limit the benefits of culturally diversified classrooms. An effective way is 'to engage international students with domestic students through formal tasks around an internationalised curriculum'<sup>17</sup>. Such opportunities can be created within classroom through groupwork tasks and outside classroom through assignments or co-curricular activities. Recommended actions include:

- Designing meaningful intercultural group tasks to which students from different cultural backgrounds can contribute their unique perspectives
- Communicating clearly to students the purpose of the intercultural group tasks and providing guidance in effective groupwork processes
- Paying attention to students' level of involvement in intercultural groupwork and providing feedback during the processes
- Assessing both groupwork processes and outcomes

### **BOX 3** Examples of facilitating meaningful intercultural interaction

- **Group-based game outside of classroom** was implemented in one Common Core course related to history at HKU. The game was based on scavenger hunt, facilitated by an interactive, automated online programme. The excitement and challenge of the game taking place outside the classroom effectively broke down boundaries between students from different cultural backgrounds.
- **A comparative cultural study requiring international and local students to work collaboratively** was implemented in a compulsory culture course for international students in Hong Kong Institute of Education (now the Education University of Hong Kong). Students were grouped in pairs or small groups with mixed cultural backgrounds to examine a local cultural issue. The group tasks involved studying local artefacts and conducting field-based research (see Note 17).

## **Principle 4:** **Developing Global Citizenship**

Teaching across cultures is also concerned with preparing students to compete globally. This mission not only involves developing competent professionals that are able to work in a culturally diversified environment and with people from different backgrounds, but also means preparing students to be ethical and responsible citizens<sup>18</sup>. Haigh<sup>19</sup> uses 'education for global citizenship' to describe the notion and emphasises that students should learn to respect the rights of their own and others and accept their personal responsibilities for the welfare for all. Providing students with opportunities to connect scholarship with the community is found to be beneficial in developing global citizenship<sup>20</sup>. Recommended actions include:

- Developing students' understanding of the requirements of professional practice and citizenship
- Presenting students with global challenges and engaging them to discuss how these challenges are interrelated and will impact on their professional and personal lives
- Providing students with opportunities to interact with the local community and encouraging them to care about, and contribute to the community
- Developing students a sense of personal responsibilities to the public

### **BOX 4**    **Examples of developing global citizenship**

- **Essay assignments that encourage critical reflection on one's discipline and profession.** In one of the Common Core courses at HKU, students were encouraged to approach the topic of renewable energy from their disciplinary perspective. Through the assignment, students reflected on how their future profession might affect and be affected by the prospect of renewable energy.
- **Purposeful and culturally grounded overseas learning programmes.** A month-long study abroad programme entitled 'People, Culture, and the Environment of Southern Africa' was designed to develop global citizenship. The programme enabled US and South African students to explore the relationship between physical science and socio-cultural phenomena. Students appreciated the opportunity to solve problems collaboratively with the local community and developed a better sense of global citizenship and social responsibilities through the process (see Note 20).

## **Principle 5:** **Promoting Critical Thinking and Deep Inquiry**

To incorporate multiple perspectives and cultures into teaching means being able to see things from an intellectual tradition and also being able to critique it. In other words, we should promote among our students the abilities to think critically and engage in deep inquiry with others<sup>21</sup>. Such abilities will enable students to make informed judgement and decision while being exposed to multiple cultures and perspectives. That is why some scholars believe that critical thinking is one of the most important competencies in a globalised world<sup>22,23</sup>. Critical thinking and inquiry skills are regarded as a set of thinking skills that one can systematically apply to analysing an issue. There is also emerging literature that suggests critical thinkers in a globalised world must also be flexible and versatile to see and embrace all kinds of differences<sup>24</sup>. Recommended actions include:

- Acknowledging different interpretations and traditions of critical thinking and deep inquiry
- Explaining the meaning of critical thinking and inquiry skills required in the discipline with examples
- Encouraging students to explore alternatives and challenge existing solutions
- Designing diversified assessment methods and providing feedback during different stages

### **BOX 5**    **Examples of promoting critical thinking and deep inquiry**

- **Using photos to tell stories** was implemented as an assessment item in one Common Core course on poverty issues at HKU. The photo story method was employed together with an empathy map. Students were asked to take a photo that reflected poverty in the city and put themselves into others' shoes. Through the process, they needed to think critically and make an inquiry into the story behind the photo.
- **A two-stage report writing assessment for developing critical thinking** was designed for business students in an Australian university. In the first stage, students were required to identify the problem from a case study. Feedback was provided to students on their problem identification. In the second stage, students needed to search and read five articles in the literature that could offer insights into the problem. The critical thinking required of students involved identifying problems, finding, selecting and reading to comprehend sources, and constructing an argument (See Note 23).

## Tricky Areas in Teaching across Cultures

### *How to Deal with Stereotypes?*

It is not surprising to note that stereotypes exist almost everywhere. They can be in textbooks or reading materials while also emerge through classroom discussions. Good practices for teaching across cultures therefore involve teachers being sensitive to stereotypes, especially not to reinforce them. One thing to avoid is to treat students from a certain country as the representative of that country as if there is only one right answer<sup>25</sup>. Individuals should be respected for their own opinions. According to Sklad and his associates<sup>26</sup>, ‘...efforts should not reinforce existing stereotypes and binaries, but challenge students’ worldviews and lead towards the co-construction of knowledge’. Our interviews with the Common Core teachers at HKU showed that some of them were aware of the issue of stereotypes. For example, one teacher said during the interview that it would not be appropriate to ask students to explain the opinions of the people in their home country.

### *Are Asian Students Passive?*

One common thought or stereotype is that Asian or Hong Kong students are shy and quiet in class. Teachers with this impression might think that they have to overcome students’ silence or shyness in their classroom facilitation. However, it has been argued that such perception of Asian students may be related to cultural differences in critical thinking or the effect of thinking in a second language<sup>27,28,29</sup>. During our interviews with Common Core teachers at HKU, we found that a number of teachers had concerns about teaching large classes filled with students who were relatively less expressive. One teacher shared her experiences in breaking down the barriers by asking students to call her first name instead of Doctor. Gradually she found that students felt easier to talk to her. Other teachers tried to increase student interaction through activities such as blogging, debates, role-plays, simulations, and short questions. Moreover, a variety of assessment methods were used to assess students’ critical understanding of the complex connections between global issues and their everyday lives. Examples included research poster presentations, photo story, and reflective diary.

### *Shall We Mix International and Local Students?*

There are certain beliefs that international and local students should be mixed in all kinds of group activities in order to maximise their interaction. However, research shows that this belief may not always be correct. For example, Tran and Pham<sup>30</sup> find that interaction between international and local students often remains at a surface level when meaningful connections and engagement opportunities are not in place. Leask<sup>31</sup> suggests that mixing international and local students requires a clear purpose, which also needs to be well communicated to all students. For example, there could be a linkage between the group tasks and the cultural related learning outcomes.

## Concluding Remarks

This briefing outlines five principles for teaching across cultures based on the literature and discusses three tricky areas that may concern some teachers. Teaching across cultures is never an easy task. However, teachers will have to face the challenges brought by multicultural classrooms as an inevitable result of the globalisation trend. Moreover, one should never underestimate the precious opportunities brought by multicultural classrooms in the aspect of developing international learning outcomes, such as cultural awareness and global citizenship. The ultimate goal is to achieve ‘internationalisation at home’ through creating a new context of teaching and learning for all students, regardless of their backgrounds<sup>32</sup>.



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