# Cultural Sensitivity in the Classroom

With small changes to your teaching, you can take advantage of the benefits that multilingual students bring to your class. Nearly half of Mason students are multilingual, and they have different levels of fluency. However, the strategies below are designed to help you support both multilingual and other students.

Faculty FAQ: What are some cultural challenges that ML/Int'l students face, which may interfere with their success in my classroom?

Research shows that international and multilingual students from other cultures outside the U.S. face unique challenges including academic, social, linguistic, psychological, and emotional challenges (de Araujo, 2011). Some of these challenges stem from distinct cross-cultural differences that result in misunderstanding and students might not feel comfortable sharing these with their instructors. Some cross-cultural differences that might present challenges for students include:

1. **Differences in expectations around the teacher and student roles within the classroom**

   Do not assume that all your students view your role and theirs in the same way. While the American culture paints the instructor as an expert, a coach, and a facilitator all at once, other cultures might view the instructor as primarily the expert with the content knowledge. Therefore, students might not be expected to challenge their instructor even though they disagree with him or her.[1]
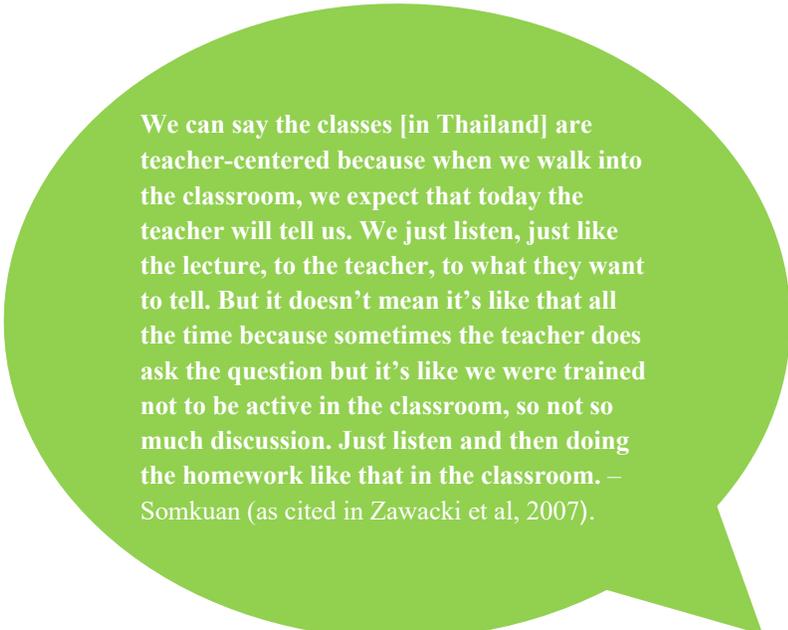
   > We can say the classes [in Thailand] are teacher-centered because when we walk into the classroom, we expect that today the teacher will tell us. We just listen, just like the lecture, to the teacher, to what they want to tell. But it doesn't mean it's like that all the time because sometimes the teacher does ask the question but it's like we were trained not to be active in the classroom, so not so much discussion. Just listen and then doing the homework like that in the classroom. – Somkuan (as cited in Zawacki et al, 2007).

2. **Differences in expectations about the classroom learning environment**

   Not all your students might feel comfortable discussing within a large group format; some might prefer lecture-style approaches where they listen to you and take notes. In other words, the seminar-style context might be uncomfortable for students who come from cultures primarily using lecture-style formats[2]. What's more some students might not feel comfortable reaching out to you during your office hours for fear of interrupting you.

3. **Differences in perceptions about grades**

   Usually, grades are important for most students no matter the culture; however, for students coming from other non-U.S. academic cultures, grades might be perceived differently. For instance, in some cultures, grades might be based on final evaluations like a final examination and other smaller assignments in a classroom might not be deemed as important as the final exam. In other cultures, final course grades might be considered negotiable.

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[1]"Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variations in the classroom." *Carnegie Mellon.* Retrieved from https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/culturalvariations.pdf

[2] Zawacki et al (2007). Retrieved from "Critical Thinking" *Valuing Written Accents.* https://writtenaccents.gmu.edu/research-findings/critical-thinking/

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For more on the differences between the American college classroom and culture compared to other cultures, please visit Carnegie Mellon's guide "Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variations in the classroom" available here:
https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/culturalvariations.pdf

Faculty FAQ: How can I help students overcome some of the common cross-cultural challenges that they experience?
Perhaps the most helpful way to support students is to show a genuine interest in their backgrounds and cultures and clarify your expectations.

1. **Recognize culture's impact on your classroom.**

   While you might want to create a neutral environment in your classroom, the fact is your class is not in a vacuum. You and your students can (and do) have other cultural assumptions that indirectly affect your classroom. These cultural values need to be recognized and can be reframed as opportunities for growth as individuals and as a learning community. Encourage all your students to share a little bit about where they come from, how they learned what they know or do, and why they see certain things differently from you.

2. **Set clear expectations.**

   Since you and your students probably have different backgrounds and expectations, use the first week of your class to set clear expectations. Among these expectations, clarify to your students how you hope they will show respect to each other and you in the class, how they will show engagement, how they should ask for feedback on assignments, and how much work they are expected to do outside class to prepare for class. Do not assume that students will agree with your expectations, so explain why you are setting them.

3. **Model how you would like your students to behave and treat each other.**

   Show don't tell. After clarifying your expectations, set the tone for an inclusive culturally-competent classroom by modeling the appropriate behavior for your students. For instance, try to learn your students' names rather than expecting that they might have nicknames which are easier for you to pronounce. Include a diversity statement in your syllabus (see GMU's diversity statement here[3]). Set up pair-work or small-group time during the class session and participate in one of the groups to model what discussion and participation looks like.

4. **Facilitate student collaborations between local and international students.**

   As students are seeking comfort in a new environment, they might prefer to sit with others from their own culture instead of mingling with other peers in the class. Consider deliberately selecting students to work with others in the class. Switch up the work groups as often as possible so that students can meet and work with those outside their

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[3] Retrieved from here: https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/purpose-and-mission/mason-diversity-statement/

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immediate/preferred circle of friends. In so doing, you will help all your students expand their networks and negotiate cultural differences while discovering similarities.

For more tips, check out the handout "Creating Inclusive Classrooms" found on here.[4] Also look at Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning on practical strategies for feedback on student writing and engaging students in the classroom.

Other Recommendations and Teaching Resources

Apply Today	Doing What Matters Working Group. (2018). "Creating inclusive classrooms: Tips and strategies" [PDF File]. Retrieved from *Center for Teaching and Learning: Faculty Conversations* https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Creating-Inclusive-Classrooms_Tips-and-Strategies_Oct-2018.pdf Center for Teaching and Learning, UMich. (n.d). "Using Student Groups: Inclusive Practices". Retrieved from http://crlt.umich.edu/blog/using-student-groups-inclusive-practices Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU. (n.d). "Classroom Assessment Techniques" Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/classroom-assessment-techniques-cats/ ULife: George Mason University (n.d.) "Religious holiday calendar" Retrieved from https://ulife.gmu.edu/religious-holiday-calendar/
Listen Today	Perez, A. & Stachowiak, B. (2016, September 22). "Bridging the culture gap." *Teacing in Higher Ed Podcast.* Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/bridging-culture-gap/ Haras, C. & Stachowiak, B. (2018, June 28). "Reflecting on our teaching." *Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast.* Podcast retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/reflecting-on-our-teaching/ Teaching in higher ed. (n.d.) "Reflective practice." Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast-category/reflective-practice/

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[4] "Creating Inclusive Classroom" *Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning.* Retrieved from here: https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/creating-inclusive-classrooms/

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	Teaching in higher ed. (n.d). Cultural competence. Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast-category/cultural-competence/
Read Today	Biddle, J., Harris-Scott, S., Lewis, A., Smith, M. & Briggs, R. (2018). "INTO Mason destination Mason: Maximizing Mason's multiculturalism" *Innovation in Teaching and Learning (10).* Retrieved from https://journals.gmu.edu/index.php/ITLCP/article/view/2257/1462 EAB Student Affairs Program (2015). "Preparing Students for the Workforce: Six Co-Curricular Opportunities for Experiential Learning" [Infograph]. Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Preparing-Students-for-the-Workforce-Infographic.pdf Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU (2018, March 8). "Mason Impact: Creating Engaged Students and Well-Rounded Scholars Prepared to Act." Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/programs/stearns-center-opportunities/faculty-conversations/ Center for Teaching and Learning, UMich. (n.d). "Teaching in the current political climate.". Retrieved from http://crlt.umich.edu/blog/teaching-current-political-climate Center for Teaching and Assessment of Learning, University of Delaware. "Engaging your students in issues of race in the United States: Supporting students and supporting learning outcomes" Retrieved from https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.udel.edu/dist/c/6655/files/2014/03/Engaging-Your-Students-on-Issues-of-Race-and-Supporting-Student-Outcomes-CTAL-web-version-ptvwx8.pdf

Do you have other strategies or recommendations? Share them at
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Suggestions for Further Reading

Carnegie Mellon. Recognizing and addressing cultural variations in the classroom. In *Teaching in an increasingly multicultural setting: A guide for faculty.* Retrieved from: https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/cultural variations.pdf

De Araujo, A. A. (2011). Adjustment issues of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities: A literature review. *Higher Education Studies, 1(1)* pp. 2-8.

Harklau, L. & Siegal, M. (2009). Immigrant youth and higher education: An overview. In Eds. M. Roberge, M. Siegal, & L. Harklau. *Generation 1.5 in college composition: Teaching academic writing to U.S. educated learners of ESL.* New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis

Roberge, M. (2009). A teacher's perspective on generation 1.5. In Eds. M. Roberge, M. Siegal, & L. Harklau. *Generation 1.5 in college composition: Teaching academic writing to U.S. educated learners of ESL* (pp. 3-24). New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis

Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning. Creating inclusive classrooms. Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/creating-inclusive-classrooms/

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). Sense of belonging and graduate students. In T. L. Strayhorn (Author), *College students' sense of belonging* (pp. 90–104). New York: Routledge.

Zawacki, T. M., Hajabbasi, E., Habib, A., Antram, A., & Das, A. (2007). *Valuing written accents: Non-native students talk about identity, academic writing, and meeting teachers' expectations.* Retrieved from: http://writtenaccents.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/valuing-written-accents-second-edition.pdf