

How to Leverage International and Intercultural Perspectives in Higher Education Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper reviews relevant literature and explores theoretical frameworks that can help college-level educators maximize appreciation of diversity in teaching and learning, so that they can take full advantage of the contribution of international diversity in the classroom. By leveraging international and intercultural perspectives, they will give all students opportunities to broaden perspectives and gain new frames of reference.

Introduction

International students attend more than 2,500 U.S. colleges and universities, and the U.S. has the highest annual enrollment of international university students among all countries in the world (Kilinc & Granello, 2003). In spite of this fact, and even though there are intercultural programs at most universities, literature indicates a lack of attention to international students in the mainstream college classroom (Tompson & Tompson, 1996). Very often teachers and U. S. students do not appreciate, understand, or respect international students. This results in bad educational experiences for these students, and, in turn, in U. S. students' missing opportunities to learn international and intercultural perspectives.

This problem may arise because teachers are not fully aware that international students have different perspectives and learning styles. As a result, teachers may not be adequately attending to these differences, and may not be aware that it is critical to appreciate and learn diverse perspectives if they are to make the most of their diverse classrooms.

The purpose of this paper is to review relevant literature and explore theoretical frameworks that can help college-level educators understand and maximize appreciation of diversity in teaching and learning. We will first look, drawing on social constructivist theories, at the way learning is constructed socially and culturally, which suggests ways that international students learn by capitalizing on their prior experience and their own cultural orientation. We will discuss the need for teachers to recognize and "activate" such resources.

Next we consider three interrelated models from the literature, examples of fundamental understandings that all college teachers should, and too often do not, bring to their classrooms. Kolb's (1981) experiential model describes four types of learning ability, applied by Rowland and Reza (2005) to different cultural groups. Two sets of concepts developed by Yamazaki (2005) and Hofstede (1997) consider how cultures are manifested in individuals' learning styles.

Finally, we will explore practical ideas that teachers can use to facilitate the diverse classroom in such a way that international as well as domestic students receive a quality education, enhanced by their diverse perspectives.

The Social Constructivist Theory

One purpose of education is to transmit cultural knowledge, values, and practices (Hollins, 1996; Strouse, 2001). In the United States, "schools ... [serve] the purpose of

maintaining ... Euro-American culture” (Hollins, 1996, p.12) and “cultural norms are reflected in overall operations of school including interactions ... between students and teachers” (p.33). International college-level students, however, bring different understandings and knowledge that reflect their prior experience and their own cultural orientation. They do not share a mainstream American cultural frame of reference, and it is therefore critical for teachers to understand how construction of the knowledge they bring has been a culturally and historically mediated process.

The traditional “banking” (Freire, 1999) concept of education, whereby the teacher transmits knowledge to students to guide them toward an instructional goal, does not promote connections to international students’ prior knowledge and experience with the topic.

By contrast, the social constructivist theory views learning to be socially, historically, and culturally constructed. Vygotsky (1978), whose work is considered to have laid the foundation of this school of thought (Moran & Hakuta, 1995; Bruner, 1997), “persuaded us that learning could not be viewed without context, as if independent of cultural or historical influences of significance. Learning is a cumulative experience derived [from] and informed by an individual’s and group’s cultural and historical experience” (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Szabo, 2002, p. 30).

Vygotsky’s theories have since been supported and applied by other scholars, notably in the realm of education. Minami and Ovando (2004) state that “[t]hrough different processes, from a very early age children are socialized into culturally specific modes of organizing knowledge, thought and communicative style.” (p. 573). A key significance of this is that “[o]ur prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information” (Cummins, 2001, p. 126). Social constructivism argues for the deeply interrelated nature of social interaction and learning, upon which humans’ higher mental function develops.

It is broadly accepted that international students from diverse cultural backgrounds have different ways of thinking, knowing, and communicating. Even at the college level, their knowledge is constructed and new understanding emerges when new input is put together with existing cognitive structures. So, if the role of culture is viewed as critical in students’ learning process, and U. S. colleges and universities “allow [international students] to use all the knowledge (from all cultures) they have experienced and when standards are not so narrow as to exclude the value of that knowledge and experience” (Oakes & Lipton, 2003. p. 84), these students will have more opportunities to access quality learning.

Teachers must develop ways to recognize the experience and knowledge that students bring to the classroom, allowing them to build their learning upon these resources through their own cultural orientation -- to teach “*to and through* the strength of these students” (emphasis in original, Gay, 2000, p. 29). Teachers can thus validate international students’ learning styles, worldviews, and cultural identities, making teaching and learning more relevant.

It is also necessary for teachers to recognize that students vary widely in their prior knowledge, and that some may not realize they have relevant prior knowledge in their native language, likely failing to acknowledge connections between their knowledge and what they are learning in the English learning environment (Cummins, 2001). A key aspect of the teaching and learning process is to construct knowledge *with* students, according to and building upon their prior knowledge -- “*activat[ing]* students’ prior knowledge” (emphasis in original, p. 127).

Minami and Ovando (2004) argue that all interaction between the teacher and students should be conceptualized and put into practice under the framework of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory. In the social constructivist classroom, the teacher’s role is not merely to transmit knowledge to students. Here, the teacher must be an active agent who encourages students to share their

experiences and learning, creating a collaborative environment in order to construct “meaning as central to students’ academic growth The classroom [must be] a community of learning where knowledge is generated by teachers and students together” (Cummins, 2001, p. 221).

Models of Intercultural Difference

In the years since intercultural perspectives have appeared in education theory, useful distinctions have been identified, as we will see in the following sections, among learning resources brought to the classroom by students from different cultural groups. Such differences certainly exist within cultural groups, but more significantly, they provide valuable perspective on the cultural orientations that Vygotsky emphasized.

As Bennett (1998) articulated, it is essential when employing cultural generalizations to avoid stereotypes, and to apply such generalizations tentatively as working hypotheses in order to recognize cultural patterns. But with this in mind, an understanding of the cultural “types” described below -- and other generally accepted models in the literature -- should be a basic essential for teachers as they strive for social constructivist dynamics in diverse classrooms.

Kolb’s Learning Model

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model holds that learning involves the totality of human activities: feeling, reflecting, thinking, and doing. Kolb (1981) considered that “most of us develop learning styles that emphasize some learning abilities over others” (p. 237). In his model, he describes four distinct learning abilities: relying on concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), active experimentation (AE).

Concrete experimenters (CE) prefer to be involved in specific experiences and to relate to people. They learn by feeling, intuitively understanding their present reality. They think it important to be sensitive toward other people’s emotions and values. In contrast, abstract conceptualizers (AC) prefer logic, ideas, and concepts, learn by thinking and analyzing, and are good at creating systematic plans and building general theories. Reflective observers (RO) prefer to understand meaning by carefully watching and listening, reflectively understanding how and why things happen. They tend to observe carefully before making a judgment, appreciate different opinions, and value patience and impartiality. In contrast, active experimenters (AE) prefer to be involved in actively influencing people and changing situations. They learn by doing, focus on practical applications, and are willing to take risks and responsibility.

Learning abilities that Kolb identifies have been related to different cultural characteristics. Rowland and Reza (2005) discuss ways that students from different cultures tend to bring particular learning abilities, as described by Kolb, to the classroom, with some Asian cultures favoring concrete experience (CE), some Northern European cultures favoring abstract conceptualization (AC), some North American cultures preferring active experience (AE), and some Latin American cultures tending to reflective observation (RO).

Cultural Tendencies and Learning Styles

Yamazaki (2005) presents hypotheses that to some degree match observations by Rowland and Reza. Yamazaki conducted a theoretical comparison using the concepts of high-context and low-context, terms coined by Hall (1976) referring primarily to communication in

collectivistic and individualistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Yamazaki (2005) hypothesized that “[t]hose with high-context culture tend to learn through the abilities of concrete experience, whereas those with low-context culture tend to learn through ... abstract conceptualization” (p. 9).

Yamazaki (2005) observes that members of high-context cultures (Japanese, Chinese, French, Arabic etc.) may be required to become sensitive to immediate environments, to non-verbal behaviors and meanings of messages conveyed in non-verbal communication, because they live in specific surroundings. This ability relies on the concrete experience abilities. By contrast, in low-context cultures (Switzerland, Germany, the United States, etc.), explicit verbal messages are more important than non-verbal messages in interpreting meanings, and members must think logically and develop abstract conceptualization abilities in order to deal with the concepts that serve as key communicative knowledge (Yamazaki).

Another concept that Yamazaki (2005) develops is uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede (1997) defines uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (p. 113). He notes that members of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures (Japanese, Spain, France, Mexico, etc.) may feel anxiety or fear when encountering unfamiliar risks, deviant ideas, or conflicts. By contrast, members in weak uncertainty avoidance cultures (the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, etc.) (Hofstede, 1997) tend to feel less uncomfortable in unclear circumstances and are more likely to take risks in unfamiliar situations when encountering deviant and innovative ideas and few rules.

Yamazaki (2005) articulates the conceptual similarity between weak uncertainty avoidance and the AE learning ability. He notes that “[t]hose with strong uncertainty avoidance culture tend to learn through the abilities of reflective observation, whereas those with weak uncertainty avoidance culture tend to learn through those of active experimentation” (p. 528).

Even though the hypotheses of Rowland and Reza (2005) and Yamazaki (2005) do not match up exactly, their ideas show us cultural patterns. Cultural tendencies in learning styles support social constructivist theories and lend credence to Hofstede’s (1997) argument that peoples’ preferred modes of learning are shaped by their country’s culture through socialization.

Learning Activities in the Diverse Classroom

In order to facilitate international students’ successful learning in the U. S. higher education classroom, teachers need to explore new pedagogical approaches that encourage students to build their learning upon their previous knowledge and experiences. Appreciation of theories from sociolinguistics, anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology can “lead teachers to structure classroom lessons that are active and social” (Oakes & Lipton, 2003, p. 229).

In order to activate students’ prior knowledge for constructing new understandings, and to increase cultural sensitivity in the classroom, teacher and students engage in inquiry-based activities, exploring and learning together collaboratively (Wink & Putney, 2002). Activities of benefit to students in the diverse classroom include “simulations, games, and role plays from which learning will flow as a result of the active participation of the learners” (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 151), together with individualized instruction, problem-solving, self-directed learning, small group work, and class discussion (Kelly, n.d.).

In the classroom, for concrete experimenters from high-context cultures, it may be effective for the teacher to create supportive, connective, and collaborative learning environments by building and maintaining good relationships. For abstract conceptualizers from

low-context cultures, it might be more effective to encourage creation of theories or models from available information, and to spend time building frameworks for future action. Or, for reflective observers from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures, it may be helpful to provide outlines of discussion topics beforehand and give students time to prepare for discussion. For active experimenters from weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, it may be most effective to present a challenging situation that requires students to take action and carry out a purpose.

In order to successfully tailor lesson plans for learners with different learning styles, Kolb's own (1984) suggestions for preferable learning activities should be taken into consideration: for those who learn best through concrete experience (CE), Kolb suggests field work, simulations/games, team projects, peer feedback, and homework; for those who prefer reflective observation (RO), learning from journals, films/movies, discussion, and brainstorming; for those favoring active conceptualization (AC), model building, thinking alone, writing papers, reading, and lectures; and for those who like active experience (AE), real-life projects, labs, small group discussion, problem solving, and case studies.

These strategies will allow international students to bridge their prior experience and current learning. Employing these, teachers can help students build rapport with one another, provide international students with emotional and practical support, and encourage clarifying in-class discussion of instructions or assignments among peers, who will serve as mentors.

Conclusion

International students have been an important part of the U. S. higher education community but have received inadequate attention in the classroom, while teaching and learning have not taken full advantage of international diversity. By raising awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, and using instructional methods responsive to diverse learning styles, teachers and students alike can broaden their perspectives.

Incorporating theories and models such as those mentioned in this paper has not been a big part of college instruction practice. It may be that college instructors are only required to be versed in their own discipline, and not necessarily familiar with pedagogy, much less intercultural learning. However, considering diversification in U.S. higher education classrooms, it may not be too bold to propose cultural training courses for all college faculty. By going through such courses, they would be able to access other proven models and frameworks beyond the paper's examples, methods to assess the learning styles of their diverse groups, and methods to know if they have succeeded, which this paper has left for further exploration.

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