



CHAPTER 2

The Role of Culture

As our classrooms become more diverse, we are tasked with the responsibility of exploring inclusive teaching approaches that honor the experiences and expectations of our students. There is much to learn, therefore, in order to best support international students for success in the U.S. higher education context.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of culture in general and expand upon U.S. academic culture in particular, in order to frame the international student experience. We also provide useful strategies for helping students take cues about what is appropriate in U.S. colleges and universities. Infused throughout this discussion, we provide questions for reflection and quotes from international students for readers to ponder.

What Is Culture?

A frog sitting on the bank of a river sees a fish swim by and asks, “How’s the water?” The fish looks up and replies, “What water?”

Culture is so very much a part of us that we may find it difficult to identify what constitutes our own culture. Definitions of culture generally include mention of shared values, beliefs, assumptions, norms, attitudes, behaviors, and artifacts. The Cultural Iceberg Model (Hall, 1976) has been used to elucidate the multiple layers of culture: Some aspects of culture, such as music, food, holidays, dress, and dance, are more visible and more easily shared. Bennett (1998) refers to these aspects as components of “big C,” or objective, culture. These aspects of culture are often taught in school, mentioned in foreign language classes, and referenced in travel guides. However, the less visible aspects of culture, those that lie beneath the surface, are known as “little c,” or

Classroom Anecdotes

If you have experienced scenarios similar to those described below, what was your reaction? What steps did you take to address these behaviors or at least to understand why they were happening?

Scenario 1

One instructor noted that some of her international students appeared reluctant to share much in groups with their peers and rarely contributed to whole-class discussions. She wanted to know what she could do to involve them without putting them on the spot.

Scenario 2

An instructor noticed that the essays from his international students tended to lack in-text citations. When he discussed the issue with students, they seemed not to understand why it was a major problem.

Scenario 3

An instructor who likes to incorporate class presentations noted that one student always apologized at the start of her presentation, making statements such as, “I know my English isn’t that good, so I hope you will understand me.” This surprised the teacher, because she believed the student’s English was quite intelligible.

Reflection Questions

1. Think of your cultural background(s). What aspects would represent the more visible (“big C”) culture? Which would represent the less visible (“little c”) culture?
2. Now, think of a time you studied a foreign language or prepared to travel internationally. Did the course or materials you used focus more on big C or little c cultural details?
3. What aspects of U.S. culture do you think will be most familiar to your international students when they arrive? What aspects of U.S. culture might be less known to them?

Student Perspectives

“Students can have much freedom in their study, in terms of subject and research interest. It is quite different mentorship in China, in which students are told by the advisor to do which type of research in which field and using which specific methods. I try to adapt to the mentorship in the United States but still have difficulty.”

—*Student from China*

subjective, culture. They include the unconscious and unspoken rules that govern our behavior, such as the hidden values and assumptions regarding conversational rituals, ways of handling emotions, notions of modesty, attitudes toward the elderly, and concepts of time, among others. These more tacit components of culture significantly impact our communicative behaviors and our reactions to the behaviors of others.

Patterns of communication in the U.S., both verbal and nonverbal, may be quite different from what our international students are accustomed to. There are distinctions related to how we greet people, the amount of eye contact we use when speaking with others (particularly with authority figures), and our concept of appropriate personal space during conversations. When our students’ expectations related to these elements of communication are violated or unmet, this can lead to breakdowns in communication, feelings of embarrassment or withdrawal, or simply a sense of disconnect with those around them. There are other cultural expectations that are embedded in the norms of U.S. institutions of higher education and are worth examining more closely.

Cultural Adjustment

The process of adjusting to a new culture is generally characterized by phases, which include euphoria, disorientation, rejection, and reintegration (Lee & Rice, 2009; Li & Kaye, 1998). Culture shock might be reflected in students’ responses to general cultural elements, such as new food tastes, housing arrangements, and transportation systems. It might also be reflected in difficulties creating or maintaining social relationships with other students.

Students entering the U.S. education system for the first time are likely to experience a particular kind of culture shock as they adjust to the norms of U.S. higher education, which may differ from those they have experienced in other countries. Students have expectations about how instructors and students should interact, how formal those interactions should be, who should talk in class, when and how to ask questions, and many other aspects of academic engagement (Ryan, 2005). Of course, we cannot assume that all international students will experience this “shock,” or will have difficulty transitioning. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware that many students do have these sorts of struggles (Andrade, 2006). In the following sections, we will highlight some of the prominent values and features that distinguish the U.S. academic context from those that some of our international students may have experienced prior.

Within institutions of higher education, there is an academic culture that draws on elements of the broader societal culture. Many international students may have studied some aspects of culture in English as a foreign language classes, but may not have been taught about how these cultural elements play out in higher education. In the sections that follow, we discuss some of the challenges international students may face with cultural adjustment in general, outline key characteristics of U.S. academic culture, and offer strategies that instructors can implement to facilitate student transitions into the U.S. academic context.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

One important dimension of culture that permeates the literature on intercultural communication is the extent to which given cultures embrace individualism or collectivism (e.g., Triandis, 2001). Collectivist societies place emphasis on cooperation, group decision-making, willingness to accept the views of others, and concern for saving face and gaining approval of the collective. In contrast, individualist societies, such as the United States, are characterized by competition, self-reliance, independence, and the rejection of arbitrary authority in favor of equality (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Triandis, 1993).

One way in which an individualist orientation is evident in U.S. higher education is in the notion of **intellectual ownership**. It is expected that students coming into the U.S. university setting will be able to develop their own ideas and perceptions about topics and theories and express their views effectively. Drawing on the work of other authors in one's work can only be done through explicit citation ("textual borrowing"), as it is believed that writers "own" their published words and ideas. Using someone else's work inappropriately (i.e., **plagiarism**) is therefore viewed as stealing, and may have serious consequences. Many students come from a different frame of reference when it comes to drawing on others' work, and therefore need to be informed explicitly about the values and practices informing how sources are used in academic work (see more on this in Chapter 4).

Another iteration of individualism is the heavy focus on **individual voice** in class discussion and in written work. U.S. students are expected to express their "own" ideas and opinions. However, students from collectivist cultures may prefer listening to speaking up. Similarly, they may choose to consult with peers before voicing their opinions, because they have been taught that the collective knowledge is more valuable than the individual knowledge. They may also not know how to enter the conversation, or feel that the processing time it takes to follow the conversation delays their ability to respond. Of course, these are challenges many U.S. students face as well, so the strategies we suggest for encouraging participation later in this chapter will be of benefit to a wide variety of students.

Student Perspectives

"At home I was used to raising my hand if I wanted to participate in class, but I quickly learned that in the American classroom, you have to be loud or just blurt it out."

—Student from Kenya

"I always want to talk with the American students in groups, but sometimes I take longer to process the question. I need to hear it and think about it first, then I have to find the language to say what I mean. But by then, someone else is talking."

—Student from Vietnam

Individualistic tendencies also influence our levels of expected **assertiveness** and **initiative**. When U.S. students have problems, they are encouraged to seek help or advice from the instructor or go in search of the information from other sources. In some academic cultures, asking for one-on-one help from the instructor is seen as presumptuous—or even a challenge to authority (e.g., Mendelsohn, 2002; see Chapter 5 for additional strategies for encouraging international students to seek support). Assertiveness also plays into the styles of argumentation expected in U.S. academic writing and class debate, which often ask that students “take a position”

Saving Face

In many collectivist cultures, there is great concern over gaining the approval of the collective and respecting existing authority structures. In some cultures, asking questions for clarification may imply that the instructor was unclear in the lecture or assignment instructions. Students might avoid asking questions in class, or might not admit to not understanding a course reading or assignment, so as not to embarrass themselves or the instructor (e.g., Watson, 1999).

and “defend” it against counterarguments. This can be particularly problematic if students are not accustomed to discussing certain topics openly (e.g., criticism of one’s government). The value of assertiveness also plays out in expectations for oral presentations, professional résumés, and job interviews, where students are expected to present a confident persona, emphasizing their strengths and deemphasizing weaknesses (Purves, 1986).

It is important to understand that lack of assertiveness on the part of a student is often the result of a **performed humility** rather than lack of confidence or ability. The tendency to downplay one’s own accomplishments and abilities is common in many cultures, as a way

to show respect for authority, as well as a value for the collective—not just the individual. These values are also embodied in the concept of “face,” which is unfamiliar to many instructors who were raised in the U.S. (e.g., Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2002).

A final way in which individualism is expressed in U.S. higher education is in the **freedom** students are given to choose their own courses, programs of study, and even assignment topics. Many international students are used to a more structured approach at their home institutions, and while they often find the freedom of choice at U.S. institutions refreshing, they may feel that they lack necessary guidance and support in making appropriate choices.

Student Perspectives

“Creativity is not that strongly encouraged in China. In the United States, you have to do something different from others. It is stressful but I really enjoy it.”

—Student from China

“At home, it is expected that you push back with your professors to engage in intellectually challenging dialogues. It is seen as an opportunity to show the professor how you can use the material and they want to see that.”

—Student from Norway

Creativity and Innovation

U.S. higher education also tends to place high value on creativity and innovation, and less value on memorization and recitation. Being able to express “original” ideas and arguments is a determining factor of success in higher education, for both students and instructors. On exams and assignments, many instructors expect students not just to summarize material, but to offer a personal opinion or critical perspective about that course material. Some U.S. instructors even encourage students to disagree with the instructor or other established authorities on a topic. Although some international