Teaching culturally diverse students online

Online teaching allows educators to connect with students and create shared experiences that might otherwise be impossible because of geographical, financial, health, or other constraints.

The convenience of online communication, however, comes at a price. The paucity of non-verbal cues – in synchronous (e.g. Zoom) as well as written communication (such as email and discussion forums) – may give rise to misunderstandings, which in turn can affect teacher-student relationships in the online classroom. The risk of misunderstanding increases when students come from cultural backgrounds that are different from our own and from each other.

This Guide provides a framework to help make sense of intercultural encounters. It suggests ways to maintain positive teacher and social presence in the online classroom and support student learning. It also highlights ways in which we can minimise the risk of mismatched expectations when working online with students from diverse backgrounds.

Understanding culture and behaviour

It is important to first clarify what we mean by 'culture' in the context of this Guide. Defining 'culture' is not a simple task. Although ethnic background may be the first thing that comes to mind, there are many more subtle axes of cultural variation. For example, communication expert Deborah Tannen (1997) suggests that gender can be considered a sub-culture, and that misunderstandings between men and women can be attributed to different styles of communication that are culture-bound. Online communication tools and environments also come with their own norms and expectations regarding users' behaviours (Thorne 2003), which when not adhered to can create communication challenges. Likewise, attaining membership in the academic community can itself be challenging to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may not have the 'cultural capital' (Sullivan 2001) that comes from a family history of academic engagement.

Cultural variation can contribute to a breakdown in communication, as individuals from diverse backgrounds may employ different 'codes' and thus make incorrect assumptions and interpretations of other people's behaviours. Developing awareness of our own cultural frames is the first step toward

successful intercultural communication, as we become mindful of bias we might apply when making sense of our interactions with students.

National culture – Hofstede's 6D Model
International students at Australian universities are drawn from many countries. While national culture is a contested concept in academia, nationality is a common lens through which we understand cultural difference.

Geert Hofstede has developed a 6-dimensional model of national cultures, as one attempt to help enable comparisons between countries. Figure 1, below, shows the 'scores' given by Hoftstede to each of the 6 dimensions – for Australia, as well as China, India, and Brazil. (Detailed descriptions of the 6 dimensions can be found on Hofstede's website.)

The model is intended to help us form hypotheses about the 'underlying frames' of reference that shape our students' assumptions and values, so that we can identify potential sources of miscommunication.

However, this model of culture has limitations. The relationship between values, norms, and behaviours is not a linear one. The same value – for example, showing respect for authority – may be realised through different behaviours. What is 'respectful' in one culture may be interpreted as disrespectful in another.

Furthermore, by making assumptions based on national cultural frames, we may fall into the trap of stereotyping.

It is important to keep in mind that:

- There are often more similarities than differences across groups. Focusing on the differences can lead to separation and conflict, rather than connection and mutual understanding.

- Individuals often belong to several different groups and their level of identification and compliance with their groups' values and norms may also vary. Therefore, assuming that someone will behave in a certain way just because we identify them as a representative of a particular group can be very misleading.
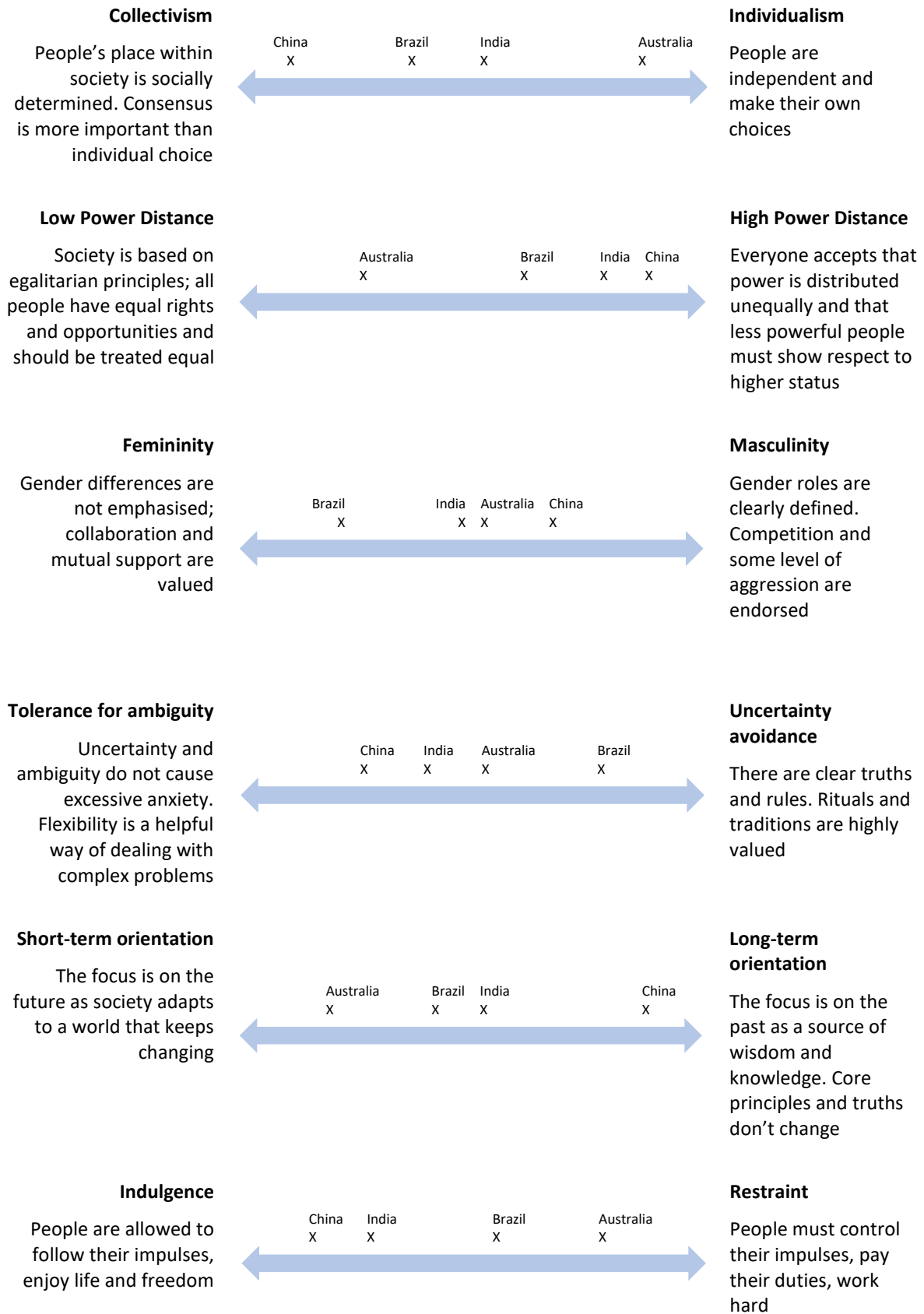
Collectivism

People's place within society is socially determined. Consensus is more important than individual choice

China   Brazil   India   Australia
X   X   X   X

Individualism

People are independent and make their own choices

Low Power Distance

Society is based on egalitarian principles; all people have equal rights and opportunities and should be treated equal

Australia   Brazil   India China
X   X   X   X

High Power Distance

Everyone accepts that power is distributed unequally and that less powerful people must show respect to higher status

Femininity

Gender differences are not emphasised; collaboration and mutual support are valued

Brazil   India Australia China
X   X   X   X

Masculinity

Gender roles are clearly defined. Competition and some level of aggression are endorsed

Tolerance for ambiguity

Uncertainty and ambiguity do not cause excessive anxiety. Flexibility is a helpful way of dealing with complex problems

China   India   Australia   Brazil
X   X   X   X

Uncertainty avoidance

There are clear truths and rules. Rituals and traditions are highly valued

Short-term orientation

The focus is on the future as society adapts to a world that keeps changing

Australia   Brazil India   China
X   X   X   X

Long-term orientation

The focus is on the past as a source of wisdom and knowledge. Core principles and truths don't change

Indulgence

People are allowed to follow their impulses, enjoy life and freedom

China   India   Brazil   Australia
X   X   X   X

Restraint

People must control their impulses, pay their duties, work hard

Figure 1: Hofstede's dimensions of national culture and scores for Australia, China, India, and Brazil

Inter-cultural – The Somethings Up! Cycle

A useful framework to interpret encounters *between* cultures is the 'Something's up! Cycle' developed at Norquest College (Apedaile 2015)

The framework can be used whenever we experience confusion, uncertainty, frustration, or other negative or positive emotions in response to another person's behaviour and we struggle to understand the behaviour from our own perspective.

- The first step in the Something's Up! Cycle (Figure 2) is recognising an incident as a potential cultural misunderstanding and describing the event as well as our experience of it (What happened? How did you feel?)
- It is important to suspend judgement and be mindful of our first 'instinctive' response. In other words, we must avoid jumping to conclusion based on our own interpretations.
- We can then begin making sense of the event by bringing to awareness our expectations and identifying what it was, exactly, that triggered our emotions.
- The following step then involves taking action, which may simply mean asking questions to gather the other person's perspective on the event or changing our own behaviour and/or expectations. In this case, a new cycle will start that would involve evaluation of the effect of these changes.

Dealing with cultural differences in the online classroom

The Something's Up! Cycle can be used any time a student's behaviour does not meet our expectations and we suspect this may be due to a cultural misunderstanding.

To inform the 'Make Sense' and 'Informed Action' stages, we might refer to Hofstede's 6 dimensions of national culture. We can also identify other potential sources of misunderstanding. These include:

- the degree of directness and confrontation that is acceptable in interaction;
- differences in time orientation and nonverbal communication patterns;
- attitudes toward silence and interruption in oral conversation; and
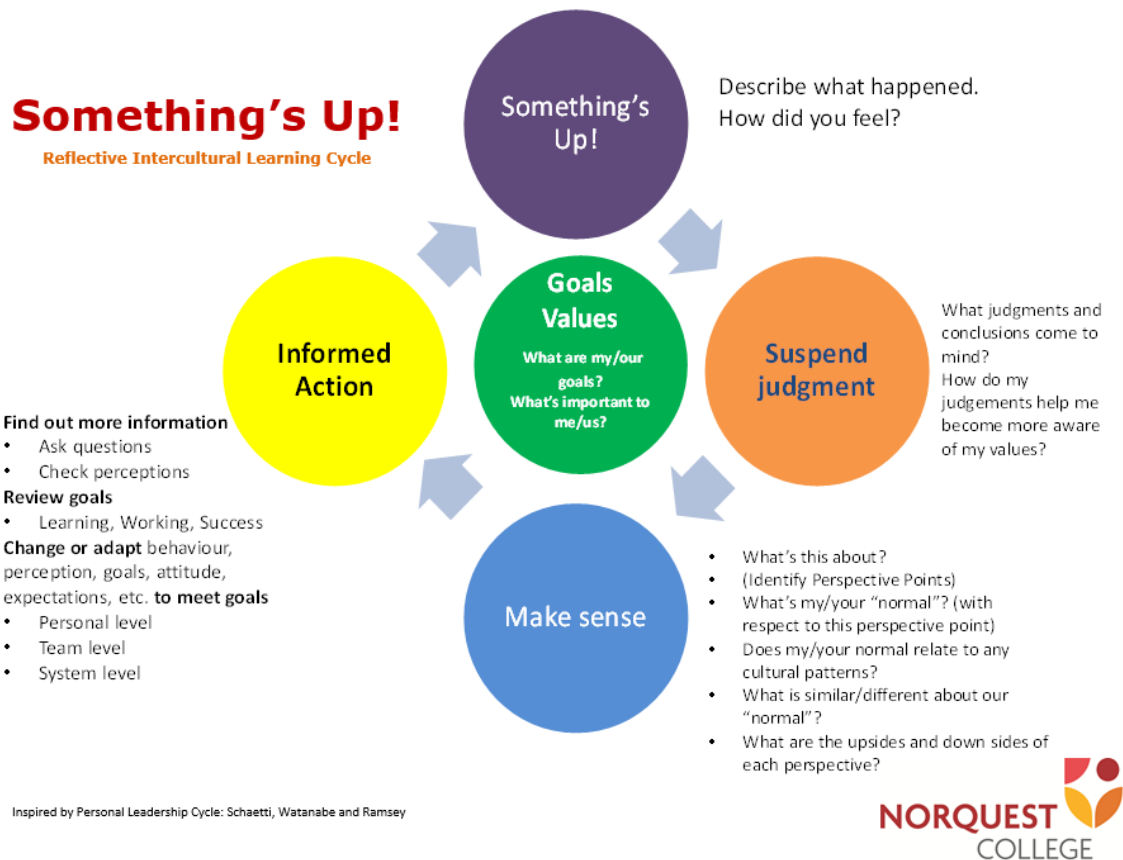- linear versus circular communication paths.

Figure 2: Something's Up! Cycle (Apedaile 2015)

A summary of the features of these and other cultural orientations is available in the Scene-by-Scene Breakdowns booklet produced as part of Norquest College's *Critical Incidents for Intercultural Communication in the Workplace* resource (2015, pp. 44-47).

Ideally, developing our intercultural sensitivity and competence should allow us to prevent many cultural misunderstandings. If we consider a student cohort as a community, it is easy to see how it is important to build a shared understanding of desirable behaviours and expectations. For example, developing netiquette guidelines collaboratively could be one of the first orientation activities for online classes. Rather than provide generic statements (e.g. 'be respectful'), we could ask students to describe observable actions that are consistent with values and norms (e.g. 'do not interrupt'), so that any mismatched expectations can be identified and addressed.

Establishing an overall culturally inclusive teaching and learning environment will also develop students' intercultural sensitivity and competence. Dimitrov and colleagues (2014) suggest adopting 13 strategies for this purpose, reproduced in the table below.

Intercultural Teaching Strategies

Strategy	Example
1. Model and encourage perspective taking in the classroom.	For example, recognize when students approach global issues from monocultural/ethnocentric perspectives, and encourage students to consider the same issue from a variety of perspectives by asking questions and expressing a diversity of opinions in class.
2. Model and encourage non-judgemental approaches to discussing cultural, social, or other types of difference.	For example, encourage students to first describe and interpret cultural differences in gender roles or health-care practices before evaluating them.
3. Facilitate discussion among students with a variety of communication styles.	For example, recognize differences in turn taking; manage interruptions; and perceive and comprehend high-context and low-context, as well as circular and linear contributions from students.
4. Create an inclusive learning environment that recognizes the barriers students face in participating.	For example, in some students' home cultures, women may only speak when the men are finished talking, or students only contribute when they are called upon to do so.
5. Expect and accept difference and appreciate differences in the relationships between teachers and learners across cultures.	Such differences may include differing expectations regarding the amount of power distance between teachers and students; or differing expectations with respect to learner initiative, as well as differences in students' orientation to rules and rule following.
6. Provide feedback across cultures in a variety of ways.	Effective facilitators adjust their feedback style to the needs of learners and recognize the way feedback is offered and received in the learners' cultures or learning styles.
7. Tailor messages to audiences with different levels of linguistic ability.	For example limit the use of jargon and colloquialisms that may interfere with a given audience's understanding.
8. Explain unspoken assumptions of one's own culture and discipline to students from different cultural backgrounds, and mentor them during their transition to Canadian academia.	For example, articulate the value of academic integrity and highlight cultural differences in citation and referencing, or create assignments that take into account the discomfort that students from Confucian educational cultures experience when asked to critique the ideas of others.
9. Design assessments that recognize and validate cultural differences in writing and communication styles.	For example the use of inductive or deductive logic and circular rather than linear reasoning in student essays.
10. Model tolerance for ambiguity when students with a variety of learning and communication styles contribute to class discussions, and help learners deal with uncertainty.	For example, rephrase circular contributions for linear learners, demonstrate patience with longer or high-context comments in class, and validate student responses.
11. Identify risk factors for particular types of learners.	Examples of risk factors are loss of face, loss of group identity, conflict avoidance, and risk of self-disclosure related to culture, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background.
12. Create opportunities for interaction among learners.	that allow them to learn from each other, share different perspectives, and share the wealth of cultural knowledge they bring to class.

Strategy	Example
13. Develop an awareness of one's own culture and cultural identity, how these are perceived by cultural others, and how they influence cross-cultural interactions.	For example, the potential influence of a perceptual lens created by one's sexual orientation, race/whiteness, privileged socio-economic status, or ability to speak a dominant language.

(Adapted from Dimitrov, Dawson, Olsen, and Meadows 2014, pp. 89-91)

Additional resources

There is a wealth of resources specifically designed to support educators teaching in intercultural contexts and to develop intercultural competence more broadly. Here are a few we recommend:

- The *English Language and Intercultural Learning and Teaching (ELILT)* framework and resources were developed at UniSA. The site provides curated materials on how to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds in their learning, including: academic reading and writing, oral communication, critical thinking, group work and research.

- The International Education Association of Australia has developed a set of *Good Practice Principles and Quick Guides for Learning and Teaching Across Cultures* (2013). Quick guides are available for each of the following topics:
    - Assessment
    - Curriculum Design
    - Developing English Language Skills
    - Managing Group Work
    - Professional Development
    - Student Services
    - Teaching

- The section of the *Globalization of Learning* module developed by the Queen's University at Kingston (Canada) includes sections on 'Models of Inclusive and Intercultural education' (including Indigenous), 'Communication in the Intercultural Classroom', and 'Interculturalizing the Curriculum'. Scenarios are also provided which you can use to test your ability to interpret student behaviours that you may find challenging but that could be explained by intercultural differences.

- The *Critical Incidents for Intercultural Communication in the Workplace* (2013-2015) set of resources developed at NorQuest College (Canada) offers numerous videos of scenarios representing misunderstandings due to differences in cultural orientations.

If you would like to ask online teaching and learning questions related to your course, you can look through our FAQs, write to TIU@unisa.edu.au, have an online consultation with a member of the TIU or complete the online modules as part of *Introduction to Engaging Learners Online.*

References

Apedaile, S 2015. The Something's Up! Cycle, NorQuest Centre for Intercultural Education, < https://www.norquest.ca/NorquestCollege/media/pdf/centres/intercultural/CI/The-Somethings-Up-Cycle-Handout-Apr-2018.pdf >.

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