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Cultural Issues in Teaching Across Borders

As the hiring of more international faculty and with the increasing use of international graduate students as teaching assistants becomes more prevalent, some interesting cross-cultural variations are beginning to appear. These go beyond linguistic misunderstandings and could have potential consequences for instruction, professor student interactions, as well as a host of expectations about student attendance, in-class student participation, gender roles and whether undergraduate students are to be held primarily responsible for their own successes or failures. If such cultural perception differences do occur they not only have potential impact on student learning, instructor evaluations but from a faculty development perspective may require some overt recognition and inclusion in formative workshops. It is important to note that the context of higher education is changing in a myriad of ways from increasing use of technological instructional aids, increasing numbers of students arriving on campus with learning disabilities and diagnosed emotional problems, learning styles not met by the traditional lecture modality and expectations that they are consumers of a product and not simply students as responsive recipients to “talking heads.”

In general, many institutions, including Drexel University have recognized that all teaching assistants require some pedagogical training that includes both theory and practical “how to” tips. Some programs for foreign TAs have also included information on some of the more obvious cross-cultural variations on body language, eye contact, personal space and classroom formality-informality. While this preparatory training is less likely to include more subtle variables that could be instrumental in either promoting or hindering successful student learning, it is at least, given as part of an introductory program. Especially at Research Intensive Universities where teaching is the second priority to attaining tenure, regular faculty with notable exceptions, may receive very little preparation for teaching. Thus, many of us here today, have probably role-modeled on our own most favorite professors, which in some cases involved experiences at least a generation ago. Formal mentoring has tended to focus on research and publication and in some fields on successful grant getting. Nonetheless, as Teaching Excellence Centers have proliferated, more attention is being given to the promotion of effective student learning and correlated faculty career satisfaction and success.

This past year, the second for the Drexel center for Academic Excellence, two of the several workshops offered to new faculty uncovered what I am calling “hidden” cross cultural differences. In a workshop on Grading, a rather heated discussion took place among some of the new faculty attendees about the importance of attendance and its place as a factor in grade assignment. While many of the participants stated that they had very clear attendance and cut policies that if ignored could lower students’ grades, one new faculty member vehemently disagreed with the very concept of monitoring attendance. This individual had been educated outside of the United States and while an

experienced professor had largely taught outside the United States as well. His view was that attendance per se should not play any role in performance evaluation. It was the successful completion of all assignments and examinations that should determine the grade, this, even if the student had missed most of the classes.

In this perspective, end-product performance was far more important than attendance or in-class participation. It is difficult to know whether personality, teaching style, class size are additional variable that form this viewpoint. Nor even if they do contribute, how they connect to the instructor's own educational experiences.

A subsequent workshop on another topic, however, raises the possibility that the cultural perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of faculty and students may be involved. This particular workshop dealt with how faculty need to "present" themselves and deal with the politics of gaining tenure, or for contract faculty of having their contracts renewed. At this workshop two professors, the one mentioned above, and another, also educated and experienced in teaching outside of the United States expressed reservations about the instructor/course evaluations that Drexel requires which may be used summatively as well as formatively. They believed that they and other professors, who expect students to behave as independent adults, do their work conscientiously and take responsibility for their own learning along with not challenging professorial expectations and demands were going to receive some negative evaluations. Some of those present who had only studied and taught in the United States agreed although less vehemently. Nevertheless, as the discussion continued, it was also apparent that both the professors had in fact studied and taught under systems that emphasized and rewarded independent learning, pre-university rigorous education and a system of competitive admissions to university rather different from the current norm in the United States. In both cases, their own studies were in universities with large lectures, often not attended by students who then spent most of their time reading on their own and going to small tutorials where they needed to be fully perform publicly to their professors and classmates standards.

Over the past two Fall terms, Drexel University has instituted a program to provide incoming Teaching Assistants with formal training in teaching and learning, in an effort to improve the quality of TA-student interaction. This program has indicated that cross cultural differences between TA's, as well as among the guest speakers who instruct them, can serve as barriers to the communication and implementation of key teaching and learning concepts.

These barriers became apparent in two specific instances. In the first instance, a TA with prior teaching and educational experiences only outside of the United States had very strong and different views on a variety of issues related to the need to increase pedagogical knowledge, gender roles, student learning needs, became disengaged and required some major interventions in order to complete the course and continue to function as a TA. In the second instance, two guest speakers, one from the United States and one from another country who were on a panel to assist the TAs with learning how to facilitate feedback on the learning of undergraduates had a major disagreement on whether this was even necessary. The guest speaker from outside the United States strongly indicated disapproval of a perceived coddling of students. Although in both

these examples, personal character attributes may have served to exacerbate the problem, the need to sensitize TAs and their instructors to cross cultural factors is visible.

Based on these experiences, the Drexel Center for Academic Excellence administered preliminary surveys to explore what cross-cultural variations might exist and in which aspects of classroom expectations. As a methodological note, in order to meet our IRB requirements, these surveys were placed on the web and set up to guarantee anonymity. There is no way to know who the individual responders were. Responses to some of the questions clearly indicate that further research will be required to control for variables of age, experience and gender.

Forty-six people responded to the survey sent to new full time faculty, six of whom identify high levels of non-U.S. education and experience. While there is overlap on some questions, there are indications that cross-cultural influences to play a part in ratings of the importance of attendance, the role of faculty in student success, and whether learning supports are necessary. It is not possible to generalize from the small sample of respondents but one provisional hypothesis is that the more years of education and/or teaching experience in the United States, the more faculty from outside the United States will reply like those educated in the U.S. This comes out in responses that are neutral to rather than hostile to providing learning supports. A second provisional hypothesis is that teaching style may also transcend culture. Those who use lectures heavily based on the text(s) tend to feel less concerned about student participation than those who either do not lecture or use lectures that are independent of the text(s). In the second pattern, attendance is seen as more important.

The responses from the Teaching Assistants were very small in number. Out of twenty-four responders, six were not from the United States. It is also useful to note that in responding to some questions, First year TAs do not have the autonomy nor the structural control to make decisions about factors involved in grading, choice of text, or attendance/cut policies. Essentially, the most critical questions were numbers 24 and 25. In responding to number 24, all the foreign TAs answered that they perceived a difference in the teaching methodologies between their original countries and the United States. In answering number 25, five responders stated that they perceived the existence of learning style differences between students in the United States and their country of origin.

These are preliminary findings based on research that is just beginning and therefore conclusions are not really possible. The future research that needs to be done will need to elicit more detailed information from both refined questionnaires and from scheduled interviews. This research will need to factor in additional variables such as Disciplines, specific locations of both University education and prior experience, as well as age and gender. It will need to be voluntary since anonymity will not be feasible.

In the meantime, from the perspective of faculty development, it appears to be important to take some initial steps to open up more focused discussions about the crossing of cultural boundaries and the potential pedagogical impacts of increasing faculty diversity.

It also calls for working with foreign TAs on how they can accommodate the differences they are finding in teaching methodologies and the learning styles of students.

Stay Tuned.