

International Students and Diversity in the Classroom



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Today, classrooms in Canadian universities are probably very different from what they would have looked like fifty years ago. With students from all over the world, and the children of immigrants a constituent part of the classroom, diversity is no longer a new phenomenon. This is even more so in many graduate schools. There are many kinds of diversity within a university, including gender, ethnic backgrounds, religions (or lack of religion), and immigration status. In this article, I will focus on diversity as it relates to international and immigrant students.

When I first came to Canada eight years ago for graduate studies in law, I was in a class of ten females and no males, and almost half of us came from different countries: Nigeria, the Philippines, Guyana, and India. For the majority of us, this was our first experience living in a foreign country. Similarly, my roommates were mostly students from Asian countries: China, the Philippines and Bangladesh.

Diversity makes for an appealing pot of soup, much like a spicy

pot of Nigerian okra soup. It comes with different interesting ingredients, including challenges and opportunities that have the potential to provide a richer experience in education than might otherwise be the case. In terms of challenges, most international students come from different teaching/learning backgrounds, different cultures, different financial circumstances, and may face diverse immigration challenges.

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Many of these challenges are resolved in time, with some reliance on resources provided by schools. But in my experience, I benefitted most from the informal help provided by other students, both Canadian and international.

For instructors specifically, respecting diversity in the classroom can prove to be a challenge, but it can also provide very rewarding opportunities. There may be little that instructors can do about issues such as providing information regarding extension of student permits, but there is much that they can do to enhance the learning experience

of international students in the classroom. A willingness to see things from the perspective of a student is an important attribute that would contribute to effective teaching in a diverse class. An instructor’s careful explanation of concepts such as plagiarism, which may be different for some international students, is vital. International students can run into trouble sometimes for paraphrasing sentences without attribution, not understanding what they have done wrong.

It is important to understand that international students come from a variety of educational backgrounds that are different from the Canadian educational system and that they may encounter a number of challenges. For instance, when a student comes from a background of rote learning, transitioning to a system that requires greater analysis and original thinking might be challenging. These challenges affect not only students but also their instructors. For instance, trying to decipher words spoken in foreign accents might be difficult for an instructor who has several international students in the class. Yet making the effort to listen patiently and engage students is likely to yield great rewards for students in terms of their engagement in the class and their confidence in navigating the world outside the school.

Providing support systems within departments is also important. I often tell new international students about a friend of mine who faced lots of challenges

early on as an international student in Canada. Her writing was poor and she despaired about graduating. Fortunately, the professors at the school who had had experience helping foreign students with similar challenges, provided her with a writing tutor. She graduated, having written a really strong thesis. She now works at a top law firm in Canada. The professor's assistance, and the student's willingness to succeed, combined to ensure her success.

But at the same time, it is important to tread carefully and to avoid condescension. Foreign students are not only a "bag of challenges"; they are also a possible treasure trove of possibilities. Many international students are, by

nature, adventurous and willing to work hard to succeed both in and outside the classroom. Many come from excellent educational pedigrees, having excelled back home or in other countries; it is important to recognise and nurture their talents. They also bring different perspectives to classes that can help broaden the horizons of their classmates, and through their contributions, they provide opportunities for others to develop a more global view, not to mention making the class more interesting.

Given the continuing trend of globalisation, diversity in Canadian classrooms is here to stay. Deliberate recognition and engagement with what 'diversity' means for students is important

both for institutions which have to consider what support services to provide for students and also for instructors who have to engage with a diverse class. Fortunately for me, I had a really positive experience in my first year at the Law School which in part encouraged me to pursue my doctorate at Dalhousie. Many of my professors had previous experiences working with international students and were able to encourage my engagement as a student. My hope is that other international students have such experiences and that those of us who aspire to become teachers will in turn make positive contributions to respecting diversity.

International Student Centre (ISES)

Our office strives to promote positive experiences by responding to the diverse interests and needs of international students, staff, faculty, and the wider community. We provide services and programs to approximately 1700 international students at Dalhousie.

Our services include:

- Welcoming and assisting international students upon arrival and throughout their studies.
- Advising students in the areas of immigration, medical insurance, work permits, financial matters, travel, language enhancement and personal issues.
- Offering a variety of social, cultural and information programs throughout the academic year.
- Advising students on international study/work/volunteer opportunities.
- Promoting cross-cultural understanding within Dalhousie University and the Halifax Community.

Find us on the *Web* at: <http://isd.dal.ca/> Contact us at: *Tel* (902) 494-1566 , *Email* ises@dal.ca (for general inquiries) *Visit* us at: International Centre, Killam Library, Room G-25, 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri