Strategies for Supporting International Students

International students make up 41% of the total enrollment at Northeastern University (fall 2023, UDS). Given the significance of this student demographic, what can we as educators do to optimize the potential for international students by tapping into their unique experiences, understanding their hopes, and supporting them as they navigate inevitable challenges?

This document provides an overview of the literature on supporting the learning of international students, organized according to four overarching recommendations: leveraging intercultural competence, building an inclusive classroom community, creating a culture of transparency, and leveraging international students' strengths.

Leverage Intercultural Competence

Three entities are involved in learning contexts that include international students: the educator, international students, and domestic students. All three of these entities can leverage their intercultural competence together, which will maximize the learning potential of the experience.

A powerful tool for leveraging intercultural competence is storytelling, such as the Story Circles method in which students share their experiences on a given theme (Deardorff, 2020). Story Circles have been successfully used in diverse communities worldwide to improve social integration (Pranis, 2005). They reinforce values, promote behavior change (Have, 2007), and provide a non-threatening way for students to share their unique cultural experiences. The Story Circles method is described in the strategy box on the right, with a link to more information about how to run one.

Studies have demonstrated that students achieve greater learning outcomes when educators tap into their own intercultural competencies to foster a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). As you leverage

Intercultural Competence Strategies

Promote story sharing: Making space for stories early in the semester helps you learn more about your students and build a sense of belonging.

Story Circles involve sharing firsthand narratives on a common theme (e.g., overcoming a challenge, moments of transformation, coping with loss).

A **physics instructor** asks students to share stories about overcoming challenges in learning physics concepts in their home country. Students then reflect on different learning approaches across cultures.
An **anthropology instructor** asks students to share stories about experiencing cultural shifts. Students then reflect on the connections between their own experiences and concepts such as culture change.

To save in-class time, or for larger classes, prompt students to share stories in a Canvas discussion.

Consider adding a multimedia element (e.g., photo, music) related to their stories adding more depth to the discussion.

Lead with Curiosity: Ask questions before passing judgement if students say or do something unexpected, such as an email request that seems overly detailed (Torres-Arends and Jacobsen, 2024). Curiosity creates an opening for discussing norms.

Use Neutral Language: Academic norms such as class attendance and citing sources vary across cultures. Wherever possible, avoid accusatory terms such as "cheating." Frame your expectations in terms of whether a given behavior is "helpful" or "unhelpful" to learning.

student intercultural competence, consider opportunities to increase your proficiencies (see intercultural competence toolkit).

Create an Inclusive Classroom Community

International students enrich campus diversity, which has been shown to benefit cognitive growth and reduce prejudice by increasing empathy and perspective taking (Bowman, 2010). As educators, we can leverage this diversity by fostering an inclusive classroom environment where students feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves and are positioned to succeed. Strategies for creating such an environment include providing context and explanations of cultural references, broadening the cultural range of examples, using activities like think-pair-share that allow students to organize their thoughts before contributing to a larger group, and offering multiple modes of explanation when introducing new concepts (e.g., infographics, diagrams, videos). These and other inclusive strategies described on the right can help ensure that students are supported and set up for success.

Foster a Culture of Transparency

International students bring a wealth of diverse experiences and educational backgrounds to the classroom. These perspectives often come with various expectations and assumptions about the learning process and other aspects of learning like office hours and participation expectations.

To ensure alignment between students and the educator, it is beneficial for educators to clarify expectations and set clear goals early on. The Transparency in Learning and Teaching Framework (TILT) offers teaching Strategies designed to clearly communicate to students the purpose and process behind their engagement with the course content. Strategies offered through the TILT framework aim to advance equitable teaching and learning environments by promoting students' conscious understanding of how they learn, with the goal of enhancing student success equitably. When incorporating transparent strategies in your

Inclusive Classroom Strategies

Cultural References: When discussing a topic with cultural refence (e.g., a popular TV show or a holiday) include a brief explanation. For example, "Juneteenth, celebrated on June 19th, commemorates the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the U.S."

Time to Process: After posing a question give students a few minutes to reflect, perhaps in writing, before discussing as a whole group or in pairs.

Intentionally Formed Groups: The stories your students share will help you do this! Provide clear roles and tasks for each member. Form groups taking identities, interests, strengths, and perspectives into consideration.

Transparency Strategies

Norm Setting: Begin the semester with an anonymous poll, allowing students to share their thoughts about teaching and learning, as well as their goals for the course. During a follow-through discussion you, in turn, can describe your approach and expectations. This creates an opportunity to reconcile perspectives from the outset.

Questions to include in such a poll could be: (1) What are your expectations of me as an instructor? (2) What do you see as my role in your learning journey? (3) What is your role as a student? and (4) What are your goals for this class?

Assignments: When introducing an assignment begin by describing the purpose, task, and criteria for success – both verbally and in writing. You may consider defining the assignments' learning benefits to students such as skills practiced and connections to the work in the discipline.

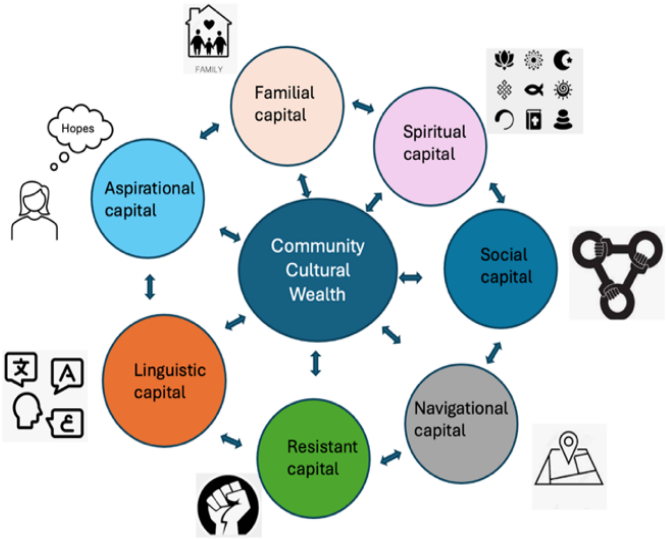
Strategy: Implement a guided peer review process in which students apply the success criteria of an assignment when providing feedback on their peer's work. This helps students develop a deeper understanding of the criteria.

classroom, it is important to stay **curious** if your students' perspectives don't match your own expectations. Instead of making assumptions, tap into that curiosity and ask students to elaborate.

Build on Students' Strengths

While the challenges that international students face are well documented, there is less discourse focused on their strengths. Recognizing these strengths allows us to better support and promote student success (Kellogg, 2021).

The Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) model describes diverse assets that international students bring to their classrooms that can be leveraged:



- *Aspirational capital:* the ability to maintain goals and hopes despite challenges can be leveraged by incorporating classroom discussions about students' professional goals and dreams.
- *Social capital:* the ability to rely on networks of friendships and cultural ties for support can be leveraged by encouraging community-building, group work, and help-seeking behaviors.
- *Linguistic capital:* the ability to think and communicate in multiple languages can be leveraged by affirming these strengths and encouraging them to bring their authentic selves into the classroom.
- *Navigational capital:* the ability to navigate and adapt to institutions not created with them in mind can be leveraged by incorporating classroom activities through which students reflect on ways they have applied their navigational capital.
- *Resistant capital:* the ability to overcome obstacles and persist through challenges can be leveraged by incorporating assignments that allow students to reflect on ways that they have used their strengths to overcome challenges (e.g., adapting to a new country).
- *Familial capital:* the network of family support and cultural values of "kinship" can be leveraged by inviting personal narratives and validating their backgrounds.

Leveraging Strengths Strategies

Aspirational Capital: When having conversations with students to tap into their aspirational capital incorporate questions such as: What does studying abroad mean to you? What goals motivate you to pursue your studies? Afterward, consider incorporating their aspirations into assignments. For example, you could have students write a paper connecting course skills to their personal goals.

Social Capital: Encourage help-seeking behaviors that incorporate elements of community to tap into students' social capital such as organizing "Collaborative Office Hours" where students come to office hours with peers by including it in your syllabus and regularly reminding students during class about this option.

Linguistic Capital: Include a project where students are encouraged to incorporate translations and cultural insights to enhance the topic, demonstrating how their linguistic abilities enrich their understanding. For example, if the student is discussing a cultural practice, they can be encouraged to include relevant terms from their first language with explanations.

Connect with Students as Whole People

To support international students holistically, take the time to engage with your students beyond the classroom. Consider offering individual meetings with students to discuss their goals, facilitate networking opportunities by introducing students to relevant campus resources that align with their interests, and promote campus events that celebrate different cultures (see cultural resources and clubs at Northeastern here). This approach will help you understand their unique circumstances and aspirations, allowing you to provide tailored resources and connect them with appropriate support.

For Further Reading

Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing. The Ohio State University. Supporting International Student Learning in the Classroom.
https://cstw.osu.edu/supporting-international-student-learning-classroom

Center for Teaching. Vanderbilt University. Teaching International Students.
https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-international-students/

Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies. Story Circles.* Routledge https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370336

Great Learning Blog. Problems & Challenges faced by International Students in the USA.
https://www.mygreatlearning.com/blog/problems-challenges-faced-by-international-students-in-the-usa/

Higher Education Today. Enhancing the Quality of the International Student Experience
https://www.higheredtoday.org/2018/07/02/enhancing-quality-international-student-experience/

Interstride Resources. Common Challenges International Students Face (and how to overcome them)
https://interstride.com/blog/common-challenges-international-students-face-and-how-to-overcome-them/

International Consultants for Education and Fairs. International Students Contributed $31 Billion to Canadian Economy in 2022.
https://monitor.icef.com/2024/07/international-students-contributed-31-billion-to-canadian-economy-in-2022/

Think, Pair, Share. Utah State University. Teaching Tips: Student Engagement
https://www.usu.edu/teach/help-topics/teaching-tips/think-pair-share

Torres-Arends, I., Jacobsen, M. (2024). "I Am Not Complaining": Listening to International Students' Requests and Complaints as Expressions of Diverse Learning Needs. *Journal of International Students*, *3*(14). https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.6298

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