

Commentary on  
The Changing Face of Canadian Universities

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September 2016

### Abstract

This paper is a commentary on how the student population of Canadian universities has changed with the arrival of international students. It discusses some of the issues that instructors have when teaching and interacting with their international students such as overcoming the language barrier, and being aware and respectful of cultural differences. It provides insight into some of the difficulties that instructors can face, and how they can adjust and adapt their teaching methods so that their international students can be successful. Topics discussed include: how essential it is that instructors understand students' educational backgrounds and how they differ from Canadian students' experiences; how students view academic integrity policies based on their prior knowledge; how international students tend to be passive learners instead of active learners in the classroom; how their reluctance to participate in group work can impact their class participation; how instructors need to explain to their students what is involved in learning how to conduct research; and how their reliance on the class textbooks for information impacts their ability to take in information during the lecture.

## **Introduction**

When I first began going to university, as a student in the 1970's, the population of the students, on my campus, were predominantly Canadian citizens. If there were any international students, they were few and far between, and did not register with me. The few I knew tended to be from English speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Britain. Now, when I walk around the campus at the University of Manitoba, I am reminded that our student body is becoming more diverse, and is increasingly made up of different nationalities. I have become so used to hearing different languages that they are no longer an anomaly, or cause me to make a special note of them. In fact, they appear to be the new norm. Just as when I began attending university, when I first started teaching at university, the majority of my students were Canadian, with one or two international students.

Now, the population of international students is growing, as more international students register at Canadian universities. According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2015) "Canada ranks as the seventh most popular destination for international students. They reported that there were 336, 497 international students in Canada in 2014, representing an 83% increase since 2008, and an increase of 10% over the past year. International students made up 11% of the postsecondary student population in Canada in the 2012-2013 academic year" (p.1). The growth in the number of international students, at the University of Manitoba, reflects the same trend. In 1992, the number of international students at the University of Manitoba was 4% of the student population, that number rose to 9.2% in 2008 (Statistics Canada, 2008), and is now listed at 13% (University of Manitoba, 2016).

As a result, as educators we need to become aware of some of the challenges of teaching international students. I am not just speaking of the more obvious attributes like language, culture, customs, and their varied educational backgrounds, although those are very important. I

am also speaking about how their presence in our classes should make us more aware of how we teach all students, not just the international students. We have to learn to pay attention to the language we use in instruction, the kinds of examples we use in class, and the types of prior knowledge we take for granted when teaching. I like to think that I treat all of my students the same way, but is that fair to students who have never studied in Canada, and have very little knowledge of what is expected of them? The following discussion is based on my own personal experience in dealing with international students and is in no way representative of all international students. However, I believe there is enough commonality that makes this discussion important to anyone who teaches international students, and increasingly, that is every instructor at the university.

### **Language**

One of the major obstacles in our classrooms, with international students, is the language barrier. I often ask myself how I can expect students to understand me, and by extension, my classes when their English language skills are so limited that they cannot understand what I am saying? Every student that comes to study, in Canada, has to pass a basic language test, but sometimes I wonder how they managed to pass the test. I have had students come to see me in my office, and they bring friends with them, because they need the friends to translate what I am saying. How can these students be successful in their studies when they do not understand the language of instruction? It is especially problematic in courses that require them to write academic essays using the English language. It is difficult enough for Canadian students to learn how to write an essay in university, and they have the advantage of having English as their first language. How then can we expect international students, where English might be their second, third or fourth language, to do research and write an essay?

I am reminded of the implications that a lack of language skills can have on students' success, when my students' complete assignments, and they do not do the assignment that I have set. I used to think that they did not listen to my instructions, but increasingly I have come to the conclusion that they listen, but they just do not understand the directions. There is a difference. And, it has made me aware that my explanations have to reflect their limited knowledge of the language that I am using in my lecture. I have found that if I explain things several different ways and give examples then they seem to understand better. But for those students who still do not get what I am saying it is very difficult for them to do the assignment. It would be the same way for me if I attended a lecture in French. I have rudimentary knowledge of French from my high school days, and can read French, but my listening and oral skills are almost non-existent, except for a few key words. I would go to the lecture and listen attentively, but I would not be able to formulate any understanding of the content of the lecture, because I would not understand enough of the vocabulary that was being used in the lecture. And, after awhile, despite my best intentions, I would quit paying attention, because the struggle to understand the material would take too much effort. This is how many international students must feel when attending our lectures. The language we use is made up of words that we understand, and we take for granted that our students also understand the language. This is not true for many students, and their lack of knowledge about the language we use in our lectures can be a real barrier to their learning.

I know that our job is not to serve as translators in the classroom, but we have to be able to make adjustments when we can see that our students are not able to take in information due to their limited English language skills. What can we do to adjust? We can begin by trying to think of several different ways of saying the same thing. One of the ways that I have found effective is to write instructions on the board, put information on document readers, or use PowerPoint

slides. Many students are able to read and write in English but have difficulty processing oral language. We can also pay attention to the language we use, and try to use more common words rather than subject specific vocabulary. Due to our subject specialties we often use words that we are familiar with and we take for granted that all people, including students, should also know them. The fact is they don't.

### **Listening**

I am often reminded of the importance of listening when I attend meetings that are outside my field of study. It is difficult for me to listen, and get the main points of the meeting, because I do not have enough background knowledge on the topic. I see this as one of the major issues with teaching international students. Their background knowledge on the topic is incomplete, or non-existent, and as a result they not only have to think about the information I am presenting, but they have to try to understand it. Canadian students often come to university with some prior knowledge on the topic, so they are able to connect the new information to their previous experiences. International students do not have that luxury, and therefore miss important information, because they do not know what is important, and what is not important. It would be like me attending a lecture on complex math principles. I would have no idea of the meaning of the subject specific vocabulary that was being used in the lecture, even though I speak English. My understanding would be limited, so I would not be able to comprehend the content of the lecture, so how could I begin to learn enough information to be able to solve a problem on my own? I would also experience difficulty in writing notes because the information would be so complex that I would not know what to write down. It is the same with our international students.

When I lecture, to my international students, I take the time at the beginning of the lecture to engage them in conversation. I discuss what I will be talking about that day and find out what they already know about the topic. Often they say they don't know anything about the topic, but after questioning they realize that they did not understand the term, and that in fact they do have some knowledge about the topic. This makes it easier for them to listen because now they know what I will be discussing. I, also, find it useful to stop the lecture frequently, and ask questions to ensure that they are still getting the message.

### **Culture**

One of the difficulties with teaching students from different cultures is that we are often unaware of their customs. They have specific ways of doing things that they have learned over the course of their schooling. These are often at odds with how we expect them to behave in our classrooms. For example, if students come from a country that does not expect them to have any opinions, it will be difficult to get them to participate in class because they have never been required to give their opinion. In their countries, the teacher is the ultimate authority, and they have to acquiesce to their instructors. Their schooling may have consisted of them listening passively and never asking questions. So, how can you deal with students in your classroom when you expect participation? Or when your assignments call for critical reading? It is a difficult adjustment for them. In order to make the transition easier, I find that providing practice exercises in whatever it is I expect the students to do works well. The importance of direct explicit instruction cannot be stressed enough when teaching international students.

I have found that many students come from educational institutions that require them to simply memorize material. I notice this when I provide quizzes in my class. The students who are used to this type of learning write their answers verbatim from the text book. I explain that I

am looking for their thoughts not what is written in the textbook. They look at me with uncomprehending eyes because this is what they are used to doing, and in their country this is what is expected if they want to be successful. It is difficult to get them to change their habits when this is the only system they know.

It's hard to impress upon some international students the need to be on time for classes. This is not something that is stressed in their culture. They often wander in 10 or more minutes late. They do not see this as being rude or disrespectful to their instructors or their fellow students. It seems to be their understanding that as long as they go to class it does not really matter when they get there. Time seems to have no meaning for them. They also do not grasp the fact that if they are continuously late that they may have to change their habits. I have had students explain that their bus only arrived at that time and therefore it is not their fault that they are not on time. They do not seem capable of understanding that they could take an earlier bus. Or, a student who explained to me that he had difficulty finding a parking spot and that is why he was late to class. I asked him if he ever considered the possibility that maybe he should get to campus earlier to allow for time to find a parking spot. This seemed to catch him off guard as he agreed that he could try that next time.

I, also, teach at the International College of Manitoba which is on the University of Manitoba campus. Late arrivals to class are the norm. This is not acceptable behaviour to me. In an effort to get them to realize the significance of being on time for class I explain to the students that I have to make plans to be in class on time. That I arrive at least half an hour ahead of time to prepare for their classes. I ask them what they would do if I repeatedly came to class late. They told me that they would report me to the academic manager because it is my job to be on time. When I tell them that going to university is their job they do not grasp the concept.



They seem to think that because they are paying the university they should be able to do what they want. Every semester I have to explain to students that coming in late is not acceptable, because I have to stop teaching while they find a place to sit, and that their fellow students often have to make adjustments, to their own surroundings, to accommodate them. They justify their behaviour with a variety of excuses such as “but I was only half an hour late”. What has worked for me, in my classroom, to give them incentive to be on time is to have a quiz at the beginning of class. However, this only works with small classes and would not be sustainable in large lecture theatres.

### **Educational Background**

When we have Canadian students in our classrooms we know what kind of educational system they came from. We can find the school curriculum on line, if we want to, and we know which classes they had to take before they could graduate from high school. We also know that all of their teachers have been through post-secondary institutions, such as the University of Manitoba, and they have all been certified by the Province of Manitoba. With international students we have no idea what kind of educational system they came through. Students have explained to me that their educational systems are not regulated, and that their teachers are often not qualified to teach. In addition, in their countries, there are public and private schools, and the public schools are over-crowded, and do not provide classes like we are used to here in Canada. Also, attendance is not mandatory and handing in assignments appears to be optional in many cases. So, how do these students cope with an educational system that expects them to be in class, and to hand in assignments on time?

It is a difficult time for them and for the instructors. One of the ways that we can make it easier for international students is to be consistent in our dealings with them. We cannot allow

one student to hand in the assignment late and yet deny another student the same consideration. I have found that it is important to establish the criteria for my class at the start of each term. I am not just referring to going over the syllabus. I am talking about letting them know my expectations in terms of attendance, assignment due dates, and the repercussions of them not following those guidelines. I explain that they will be docked marks for late submissions. If they hand in an assignment late, they lose marks. I have to be consistent with this policy, regardless of the excuses provided by the students as to why they were late handing in an assignment. Consistency is important.

### **Academic Integrity**

Another challenge to teaching international students is explaining to them that they cannot just copy and paste information from an article into their own papers. For many students this is what they learned in their home countries. As one student explained, in his country, copying is a form of respect. It shows that the student respects the author's point of view, and as such they pay honour to the author, by copying their work. I have heard similar stories often enough to know that the student, who told me about this practice, was not trying to get away with anything. How, then are we to explain that in Canada this is not a form of respect but is instead a form of cheating?

It is difficult to explain the concept of academic integrity, due to the availability of the internet, because it is easier and easier to copy and paste information. We discuss plagiarism in my classes. When I ask students what it means to plagiarize, they can define plagiarism. They know it means taking credit for something that is not their own. However, avoiding doing that is the challenge, since they do not see what they do as plagiarism. When I find a student has plagiarized a part of their essay, or in some cases the whole essay, I call them in for a one on one

discussion. I am careful to have the parts of the essay they plagiarized highlighted in their essays so we have a starting point. I ask them where they got the information. Sometimes students plagiarize inadvertently because they are not familiar with proper formatting, and how to use citations. This then becomes a different problem. It is not that they are plagiarizing, but they do not understand how to properly cite their sources.

Sometimes students will tell me where they got the information and they tell me that they put the citation on the references page. I explain that this is not enough because I have no idea which author is responsible for which information. This often fixes the problem as the students then take their essays and put in the correct citation which tells me that they know that the information is not their own.

For other students who have plagiarized deliberately because that is what they have learned, it is more difficult to explain what has to be done. The fact that they have to put things in their own words is difficult because English is not their first language. Also, in their cultures they may have been trained to only put down what their teacher tells them. They do not know how to write, or think critically, which is necessary for university study. Some students are penitent and will confess immediately when confronted with their plagiarized essay, some are combative and will argue that the essay is their own work even when confronted with the evidence, and others honestly have no idea that what they have done is not acceptable. It is worthwhile, as an instructor, to find out which of the scenarios characterizes our students so that we can take appropriate measures.

### **Passive versus Active Learners**

Most international students are passive learners in the classroom. They are reluctant to answer questions, or get into discussions for many reasons. Some of the more common reasons

are that they feel their English language skills are not proficient enough to talk in class, they are not used to talking in class due to their cultural differences, and they think that I, and the other students, will not be able to understand them, when they answer, due to their accents. This is especially noticeable with students from Asia who are used to a passive learning environment. Their schooling system stresses that they are not to talk in class, they cannot have their own opinions, and that if they simply repeat what their instructors said they will pass the course.

As a result these students often do not attend class because they believe that they can learn everything from the textbook, or from the class PowerPoint slides. They tend to rely on memorizing information which is a passive approach to learning. As I mentioned previously, often the answers to their exam questions are verbatim from the textbook or class slides. And, because they rely on memory, which is unreliable, they miss important information that would help them when they are doing their assignments, or when studying for their exams. Sometimes they depend on friends to tell them what they missed and how to do the assignments. This is also not a good strategy as their friends often have the same issues that they have.

Another issue for international students, which makes them more passive, is that they are often at a loss for what to say since their educational system has not prepared them to become critical thinkers. They do not know how to provide an opinion since they have never had to do that. In addition, their lack of language skills puts them at a disadvantage for answering questions in class. The length of preparation time they require before they speak is longer than an average Canadian student, and so they feel uncomfortable making the instructor and other students wait for their response. Many instructors, incorrectly assume, that the student does not know the answer, when in fact the student is trying to formulate their answer. The wait time for students to answer a question is very short, in most classrooms, before the instructor moves on to

another student. This can be frustrating for international students and soon they will quit trying to answer questions. As instructors we should provide enough time for our international students to come up with an answer if we expect them to participate in class.

One of the ways that I have found that works with getting students to be more active in class is to ask them questions. I wait until someone answers and this often helps others begin talking. Since it can take longer for them to formulate an answer I have become used to periods of silence. I, also, get them to talk about what happens in their countries in terms of what I am discussing in class that day. For example, if I am discussing how cultural values impact how they read and write about certain topics, I ask them how people in their culture feel about topics such as vaccinations or abortion. This usually provides a lively debate with students anxious to tell what happens in their culture. If we, as instructors, can use their prior knowledge about a topic it makes it easier to get them to participate in the classes.

### **Amount of Group Work**

If your class requires group work, as mine does, this is also a challenge for international students, especially if they are grouped with Canadian students. They are often too shy to voice their opinions because they are not comfortable with their overall language skills. This means that in group work they do not participate and will sit back and let someone else do all of the talking. The other students do not press them for answers because they often assume, incorrectly, that the international students are not interested in participating. It takes a lot of preparation to get international students to feel comfortable taking part in group discussions.

I walk around during group work and ask individual students for their opinions on the topic. This tends to make the person feel more comfortable because they notice that the other students are listening to them and value what they are saying. When I leave each group I notice,

that for the most part, the international students do begin to speak. Of course, practice does help, so the more group activities we have the more comfortable the students will begin to feel about participating. It takes patience but the rewards are worthwhile. I have found that one of the most efficient ways to get international students to feel more comfortable participating is to pair them with a student who is more sympathetic and patient. This serves the purpose of providing the international student with a way to interact because the other person waits for their response.

### **Conducting Research**

In my course students are required to write argumentative essays. In the process of writing an argumentative essay they have to conduct independent research. This is difficult for international students mainly because they have never had to do research before to write an essay. And, if they did do research it was based on Wikipedia or Google. They have no research skills, and so need to be taught how to look for information, and how to judge that information. It is a difficult transition for them. Once I show them how to go online, and use the library to search for articles that will support their argument, they can usually do that much.

But then comes the hard part of the assignment which is actually having to read the article looking for information that they can use in their essays. This can be frustrating for them. Many of the articles are written in language that is difficult for them to understand. This leads them to try to find the shortest article possible, since it takes them such a long time to read an article, due to the difficulty of understanding exactly what it is they are reading. The vocabulary is unknown, and the concepts are written by people who are experts in their fields, so they often take shortcuts with their explanation assuming that everyone who reads the article has some background knowledge on the subject. This is not the case for most international students who are not familiar with the subject. One of my international students, came to see me during my

office hours, and said he was having trouble finding an article for his essay. I asked him if he remembered what I had shown them in class about how to find an article from the library website. He said yes, and he had found articles, but he did not understand them. He explained that he had read a number of articles but did not know how to take the information from the article and use it in his essay. I realized, at that time, that students need to be taught how to critically read an article, and not just be taught how to find an article. This is a skill that all students require, not just international students, but is one that we don't often think about when teaching our classes.

Another issue, is that students from Asia, who account for 53% of international students (Lu & Hou, 2015), often use famous people's quotes in their essays such as Confucius, or Mao, to provide support for their claims. I once asked a student why he had put sayings by Confucius in his essay. He explained that this is how they are taught to write in their home country. People who are revered in their country are often quoted to show respect. These students come from an educational system that is geared to copying what others say and using it in their essays. When I explain that it is not acceptable in our educational system, they are confused. They want to know why they can't quote people they respect. I explain that just because Confucius is respected in their country, he is not an expert in whatever topic they are writing on. This is just one of the ways that students have difficulty when writing due to their inability to understand exactly what the expectations of the assignment are now that they are away from their home country.

### **Use of Textbooks**

For many international students, especially those from the Asian countries, the textbook is seen as the authority for the class. In their countries, the textbook is what they need to study for their courses, and their teachers follow the textbook closely. In Canada, the textbook is a

guideline, but most instructors do not lecture from the textbook. This is confusing for students who are used to being able to read the textbook and know everything about the course. Their preferred method of learning information is to memorize the textbook. This is not acceptable in Western universities where instructors expect students to read the textbooks and to be able to discuss them in their own words. If, as instructors, we understand that the textbook is a very important part of their overall learning we can make adjustments by explaining how the textbook relates to what we are discussing in class.

### **Conclusion**

International students tell me that the educational system in Canada is reported to be one of the best in the world and they are happy to be given the opportunity to live and learn in Canada. As an instructor, I understand that they feel privileged to study in Canada, and I attempt to show them the same amount of respect that they show me. I know they are working really hard to fit into a system that is so different from what they are used to. I have to be careful about being impatient with their seeming lack of participation and instead give them time to respond before I move on to the next student. I encourage them to come to see me if they are having difficulty, especially those students who come from educational systems that do not encourage dialogue between instructors and students. As instructors, we have to be willing to learn from them just as they are learning from us. They have to make adjustments and so do we. It's a steep learning curve for both instructors and students, but one that is worthwhile, as it will benefit both groups.



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