

## Teaching International Students at Saint Mary's: Opportunities and Challenges

Roxanne Richardson  
Saint Mary's University

*International students share a host of problems. For many, it is the first time they leave home and soon discover that their new host country has traditions, cultures, and educational standards that differ from their own. The initial excitement upon arrival is often followed by a difficult period of adjustment. As university instructors, we must reflect on our own practices and find new ways to provide better learning opportunities for our international students, ones that will also benefit our Canadian students. Practices that increase student engagement and internationalization in the classroom will have a positive effect on learning by all.*

### History and Origin of Internationalization

Throughout history, universities have been 'international' institutions. For example, during the first millennium, centres of scholarship arose in Egypt, Greece, Persia, China, and Japan and foreign students were the norm, rather than the exception. This also applied to early European universities, but with the rise of the modern nation state between the 18th and the 19th centuries, international student numbers began to decrease and universities began teaching in national languages, rather than in Latin. Following World War II, international study was again fostered to help war-affected countries, those where educational infrastructure was rudimentary, and pro-

moted international good will (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Currently, many universities encourage international study to provide students with an enriching experience and also, one that may ultimately improve employment opportunities.

The number of students studying in higher education institutions outside of their home countries has grown dramatically over the past 10-15 years. The figure now approaches three million, a 50 percent increase since 2000 and a 200 percent increase since 1995 (OECD, 2008). This trend is accompanied by an increase in the number of students pursuing higher education globally. Over the past 25 years, the recruit-

ment of international students has become a growth industry. Some view internationalization as a way of filling university classrooms, but Aulakh et al. (1997) claim that the aim of internationalization should be to “produce graduates who are capable of solving problems in a variety of locations with both cultural and environmental sensitivity” (p. 15). In an internationalization survey carried out by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC, 2006), 92 percent of respondents reported that their main reason for internationalizing their university was to “promote an internationalized campus and greater diversity on campus.” Generating revenue was rated important by only 62 percent of respondents, while only 10 percent commented that filling classrooms is the primary reason for recruiting international students.

In Canada, since 1995, the number of international visa students has more than doubled. By 2006, there were 70,000 full-time and 13,000 part-time visa students (approximately seven percent of full-time undergraduates and 20 percent of full-time graduate students). They originated from over 200 countries (AUCC 2007); Asian students accounted for almost 50 percent, and 44 percent of these were Chinese. About one-fifth of the visa students were European (around half from France) and 16 percent were from North and Central America or the Caribbean (*Record*, 2005).

Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, has over double the Canadian average of international undergraduate students (>16 percent in 2007-2008). The students come from over 80 countries, but almost 40 percent are from China. On campus, another 120 students study English at the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Centre. In part, the large contingent of international students results from Saint Mary’s participation in international development projects in the 1980s, including the Chinese Language and Cultural Project and the MBA program at Xiamen University. To coordinate and support these programs, the International Activities Office opened in 1992. It worked with faculty and staff to develop and manage international projects but then extended its mandate to include group training programs and to market Saint Mary’s internationally.

In order to be successful, international students have to adjust to university, no matter where they come from. Indeed, it is clear from talking with international students over the past decade that they do adjust, some with more success than others. Many are not aware of the numerous support services available, perhaps because they are reticent about asking for assistance. International students can act as ‘indicators’ of the quality or success of university instruction. They point out aspects of teaching that are challenging to all students. If we pay attention to the challenges of international students, and improve conditions for them, we improve conditions for all students.

## Culture Contact Literature

International students are a widely-studied group in culture contact literature. The language, norms, laws, and people differ from those in their native land. Lysgaard (1955) calls the period of adjustment “culture shock,” with an individual passing through four stages. In the honeymoon stage, students are often excited about their new surroundings, tending to take on the role of tourists. As classes start, they may enter the anxiety stage where feelings of isolation or being ‘different’ increase. Often this stage is followed by one of depression. Intervention can reduce its severity and help students reach the adaptation stage. Bennett (1986) describes the journey of international students as one that changes from initial ignorance and resentment to one of understanding and empathy, where students gradually move from the periphery to the centre of the new culture. Adler (1975) explains that the “shaking” of personality allows a more integrated and trans-cultural self to be constructed. Anderson (1994) believes adjustment to be a cyclical process of overcoming obstacles and solving problems. Students generally work out a new identity that encompasses both old and new cultures.

## Student Adaptation

International students must undergo both psycho-

logical and socio-cultural adaptations. The former is affected by personality, life changes, coping styles, and social support, whereas the latter relates to the ability to “fit in,” and is affected by how well the students understand the new culture and acquire social skills (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The greatest difficulties are usually experienced early and by those who do not cope well with stress. If language is a barrier, the period of adaptation tends to be extended. Proficiency tests in English give some indication of a student's language skills, but language testing has limitations. Students assume that their training in English is sufficient but, when they arrive and encounter ‘local’ English, they frequently find that they do not understand or cannot understand. This increases the culture shock effect. They then have to deal with apprehension, embarrassment, and fear in the process of improving their skills (Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007).

In many cultures, written/oral work does not need to be cited as all information is considered to be collective wisdom, not an individual's own work (Ryan, 2005). Plagiarism can also be related to language proficiency as some international students may be aware of what plagiarism is, but may not have the literacy skills to read, extract relevant points, and then put them into their own words.

International students also have to adapt to a new classroom culture. Many Caribbean students, who appear to fit in well, have told me that class discussions are used less frequently in their home countries and it takes them awhile to start to feel comfortable in voicing their opinions openly. For others, the struggle is much greater. In Asia, the ‘sage on stage’ model, a teacher-centered approach, is more common than the learner-centered style of teaching frequently used in Canadian universities. Students from these countries may have never been encouraged to express their opinions to the instructor. Instead, they have been taught to focus on passing exams. Some international students describe our approach as intimidating and they find it virtually impossible to challenge ideas that are presented to them in class. We must provide these students with models of the process that we expect them to use. We also have to be patient when we want them to participate in class discussions. In many cultures, modesty is an impor-

tant virtue and students may feel that they will ‘lose face’ among their peers if they contribute their ideas, and challenge the facts taught.

## Class Practices

By the end of my first semester teaching an upper-level environmental seminar course 12 years ago, I realized that the class was divided into two groups – eager participants and non-participants. Not all of the students in the latter group were international students; some were shy, reticent Canadian students. However, all the students in this class are required to report, orally and/or in writing, the significance of current research on a range of environmental topics, to question arguments presented in class, and offer their viewpoints. Therefore, I had to initiate changes that would help all students succeed and improve their communication skills, and in some cases, their linguistic skills as well.

The seminar class is capped at 15 students, and usually, about 25 percent are international visa students. Most have been in the university for two or three years and are accustomed to the classroom culture at Saint Mary's. However, classroom experiences vary widely, and many instructors do not require active participation in class. I discovered that some international students were still not comfortable speaking English publicly when they had to participate in their first assignment. Others (including some Canadian students) appeared to be very distressed by the experience, and found it impossible to take part without reading directly from their notes. Since my aim was not to embarrass or intimidate students, but to provide them with the opportunity to share their research and experiences, I had to address the challenges that they were facing. By doing so, I believed that I would improve conditions for everyone in the classroom.

On the first day of the semester, I now try to get to know my students and give them the opportunity to get to know each other. I want to find out the range of class expertise, their countries of origin, countries visited, issues of interest, and likes and dislikes. Many international students will not volunteer

this information orally, but are usually happy to write answers to my questions. This strategy helps me identify those who are eager to speak out, those who will only speak when directly asked, and those who remain silent. I explain what is expected and how I see my role in the classroom as a facilitator, rather than as just their teacher.

Throughout the semester, I invite a range of speakers to visit the class from community organizations, political parties, local municipalities, the Natural History Museum, federal or provincial government bodies, consulting companies, and universities. Prior to the speaker's visit, I devote a class to discussions/debates/oral presentations that are related to the theme of the forthcoming seminar. This provides students with background knowledge and the opportunity to formulate questions for the speaker. International students frequently struggle with this type of format. They know that they are required to participate in class but, due to their previous educational experiences, it can be an agonizing process for them. Oral presentations can also be daunting. To help them become more confident, non-Canadian students are encouraged to present issues related to their country of origin that are associated with the theme. As a result, the rest of the class learns a new perspective and lively discussions often ensue. Students who seldom voice an opinion usually relax when they talk about a topic that is familiar to them, and when they find that others are eager to learn about their culture and how their country addresses particular environmental concerns.

Many students have negative perceptions about the debate format, but collaborative work can foster a greater understanding and a respect for different cultures, breaking down stereotypic views. However, students often prefer to work in their own cultural groups. Studies in Australia found that the majority of students choose groups where individuals feel "comfortable." Such groups are from similar cultures, think in a similar manner, share similar personalities, and have a similar sense of humour (Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995). When I first started to run the seminar class, I encouraged students to pick their own groups, decide on their debate roles, decide who speaks first, who takes the most difficult posi-

tion to defend, and choose the format of the debate (formal vs. informal). I discovered that this could result in debates that were 'painful,' or sometimes too competitive, resembling a boxing match with only the debaters participating and everyone else afraid to say anything. I found it best to 'break up' the groups. Dominant students (i.e., outspoken ones) should not be permitted to debate against those more inhibited in speech, and international students needed to be represented on both teams to encourage discussion of global issues.

The first debates of the semester are now treated as 'trial runs' and I guide each student through the whole debate process. We choose the topics as a class to make sure that everyone is familiar with the material, and I assign the teams, roles, and speaking order. Students, who are initially very timid about speaking, gradually find themselves becoming more involved in class. I try to assign them a debate role that allows them to prepare most of the material in advance so that they can attempt to predict the arguments of the opposition and prepare responses. This is especially helpful where language proficiency is somewhat weak.

Not all problems relate to international students. Domestic students may not participate in class because they are introverted, disinterested in the material, or unprepared for the day's lesson. While international students may be silent for the same reasons, one has to be aware of problems related to linguistic proficiency, cultural experiences, or educational background if success is to be attained in this type of classroom format.

How successful have I been in improving performance and engagement in the classroom? Attendance has increased dramatically over the past 12 years (from about 70 percent to more than 90 percent), partially because I evaluate class participation using a rubric that is made available to the students on the first day of class. Students also evaluate each other (anonymously), helping them learn how to critique the work of others, and ultimately their own work. Comments on course evaluations indicate that most students, not just my international or shy ones, feel that they have improved dramatically in their ability to interact with others and research and pres-

ent information in oral or written format. Therefore, by continually addressing the challenges of our international students we help all of our students. Allowing international students the opportunity to share their cultural backgrounds and experiences enriches everyone in the classroom.

Finally, even though my seminar class involves a small number of students, I incorporate many of the same techniques in my large first-year class (65-75 students). This has enhanced my satisfaction as a teacher and the enjoyment and academic achievement of the students. Each year presents new challenges and new opportunities, and learning to deal with them in new ways fuels my enthusiasm for teaching.

## References

- Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 15*, 13-23.
- Anderson, L. E. (1994). A new look at an old construct: Cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*(3), 293-328.
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC]. (2006). *Internationalizing Canadian campuses*. Retrieved from [http://www.aucc.ca/\\_pdf/english/publications/aucc-scotia\\_web\\_e.pdf](http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/publications/aucc-scotia_web_e.pdf)
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC]. (2007). *Trends in higher education: Enrolment, Vol. 1*. Retrieved from [http://www.aucc.ca/\\_pdf/english/publications/trends\\_2007\\_vol1\\_e.pdf](http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/publications/trends_2007_vol1_e.pdf)
- Aulakh, G., Brady, P., Dunwoodie, K., Perry, J., Roff, G., & Stewart, M. (1997). *Internationalizing the curriculum across RMIT University*. Melbourne: RMIT.
- Bennett, M.J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10*(2), 179-196.
- Li, H., Fox, R., & Almarza, D. (2007). Strangers in stranger land: Learning, language, culture. *International Journal of Progressive Education, 3*(1), 1-44.
- Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin, 7*, 45-51.
- Mullins, G., Quintrell, N., & Hancock, L. (1995). The experiences of international and local students in three Australian universities. *Higher Education Research and Development, 14*(2), 202-231.
- Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD]. (2008). *Education at a glance: OECD indicators*. [http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_39263238\\_41266761\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_41266761_1_1_1_1,00.html)
- Record number of foreign students choose Canada*. (2005). Retrieved from [http://www.workpermit.com/news/2005\\_10\\_13/canada/record\\_number.htm](http://www.workpermit.com/news/2005_10_13/canada/record_number.htm)
- Ryan, J. (2005). Improving teaching and learning practices for international students: Implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. New York, Routledge.
- UNESCO. (2006). *Global education digest: Comparing education statistics across the world*. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/ged/2006/GED2006.pdf>
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock*. London & New

York: Routledge.

Ward, C. & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of socio-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(4), 659-677.

## Biography

Roxanne Richardson is an Instructional Development Associate for the Centre of Academic and Instructional Development at Saint Mary's University in Halifax and she also teaches first-year and senior students in the Environmental Studies Program. Her research interests include environmental education, student success, the first-year experience, and the relationship between human and environmental health.