Best Practices for Teaching International Students

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Abstract:  Wǒ bù míngbài is a common phrase among Chinese international students enrolled in U.S. institutions. This phrase, “I don’t understand” is not limited to Chinese students but is often expressed by many other international students as they strive to succeed in courses overseas. A record high number of international students, 764,495, attended U.S. universities in 2011–2012 and this number has consistently increased since 2003–2004 (Chow & Bhandari, 2012). Are U.S. faculty prepared to teach these the ever-diversifying student body of our American institutions? Are there cultural differences among international students that faculty need to address when engaging in course design and delivery? This article seeks to address the best practices for teaching international students.

Key words: international students, course design and delivery, learning by doing, workforce skills

1. Introduction and Background to the Study

Wǒ bù míngbài is a common phrase among Chinese international students enrolled in U.S. institutions. This phrase, “I don’t understand”, is not limited to Chinese students but is often expressed by many other international students as they strive to succeed in courses overseas. A record high number of international students, 764,495, attended U.S. universities in 2011–2012 and this number has consistently increased since 2003–2004 (Chow & Bhandari, 2012). The literature is replete with numerous studies espousing the benefits (both cultural and economic) of international recruitment at U.S. institutions [including this author who has published several studies on this very topic (McFadden, Maahs-Fladung, & Mallett, 2012; 2013; Mallett & McFadden, 2009, 2009a). But the question remains, are U.S. faculty prepared to teach these the ever-diversifying student body of our American institutions? Are there cultural differences among international students that faculty need to address when engaging in course design and delivery? This article seeks to address the best practices for teaching international students.

Before the best practices for teaching international students can be described, it is necessary to provide a brief review of literature in the area of adult learning. The purpose of the literature review is to provide the reader with the framework for these the suggested practices. This literature is by no means exhaustive as new studies on how to teach adult learners, whether they are English language learners or native English speakers, continue to emerge.

Tinto (2003) states that a disconnect occurs when learning is passive. By passive, he is referring to the
familiar “sage on the stage” approach to pedagogy where the students listen passively as the instructor imparts knowledge about a particular topic. In this venue, students generally accept the information submissively without critique or application. This mode of teaching, although unpopular among students (Pharr, Arnold, Prince, Brown, McFadden, & Maahs-Fladung, 2012), is still the most preferred method of teaching as evidenced by student opinion surveys (Carlson, 2005). Kimber, Ho, and Hong (2010) found that undergraduate students in Hong Kong were motivated by courses that were relevant and interesting, included learning activities and assessment, taught for understanding, and involved close relationships with both the teacher and other students. In their research among international students from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, Gillett and Baskerville (2012) purport that students only preferred lectures if the instructor was “an expert, maybe funny, told stories, left the script, but was knowledgeable and conveyed the big picture” (p. 165). The students did not like PowerPoint presentations, which have become commonplace in lectures these days (Gillett & Baskerville, 2012). The students instead preferred individual, problem solving learning and learning by praxis.

What is interesting to note is that, on the whole, the Asian students did not like social group learning (Gillett & Baskerville, 2012), which indicates a preference ostensibly cultural in its origins. This finding raises the question as to whether social group learning should be avoided in teaching international students — an inquiry which seems to contradict Tinto’s (2003) research on adult learning. Cultural differences may supersede the theories and principles of learning for English speaking adults.

Tinto (2003) recommends a restructuring of learning to include creating an environment where students are connected to each other and the institution. Tinto (2003) asserts that “Learning is better together” because students become a resource for each other (p. 2). Demaris and Kritsonis (2008) state that when students are engaged with other students, they have a common purpose. Learning becomes meaningful and relevant to real life experiences.

Price (2005) expands the relationship concept to suggest that instructors created small learning cohorts within the class. These learning communities improve employability because they “foster workforce skills” (Dodge & Kendall, 2004, p. 150). Most workplace environments require employees to collaborate with each other on various projects. Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2001) assert that learning communities foster problem solving, motivation and self-regulation, important workforce skills. Kemp’s (2010) research suggests that an active learning community within a blended classroom environment (face-to-face and online interaction) improves workforce skills and knowledge among undergraduate international students. Students “create, share, and build knowledge together” (Kemp, 2010, p. 62).

Since many courses today are delivered using a blended approach, it is important to examine the literature on online learning. Hughes’ (2009) research on the use of online resources for study purposes viewed international students “through a information literacy lens as information-using learners” (p. 126). Hughes purports that online learning is an integral part of the whole learning experience and should not be viewed simply as discreet skills necessary for completing coursework. Her study recommends an “inclusive informed learning approach that responds holistically to identified strengths and challenges of international students” (Hughes, 2009, p. 144). Informational literacy education should be integrated into the course rather than taught as isolated skills. Cross-disciplinary collaboration between academics and support personnel is necessary with this approach. International students would then be better able to use online resources, engage in scholarly practices, and find themselves more equipped to tackle challenges faced in the classroom environment.

The role of support personnel is crucial to both the academic success and the emotional wellbeing of international students. Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove (2013) examined advisor support, sense of belonging, and
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academic self-concept among international and domestic graduate students. Currently, there are 461,000 international graduate students in the US (Council for Graduate Schools, 2012). Curtin et al. (2012) reported that international students valued “research-related and other academic experiences” more than social experiences (p. 108). This was not the case with the domestic students. Paradoxically, Trice (2006) found that international students who socialize more with Americans were better acculturated to the US, socialized more with other international students, and were more involved in campus activities. Curtin et al. (2012) also reported that advisor support was important to the international students.

Not surprisingly, Cheng, Myles, and Curtis (2004) report that writing tasks and speaking were most difficult for the graduate international students. Although the students had developed strategies such as practicing their class presentations and using the language and structure from textbooks and journals to help with the writing, they still felt that their writing and language skills needed improvement. Cheng et al. suggests that international students would benefit from oral presentations and writing workshops as a means of having conversations with native English speakers and becoming more acclimated to the university and local community. International students would benefit from participating in a pre-enrollment course with content-based instruction (Cargill, 1996). Freeman (2003) suggests offering language support in a noncredit course parallel to content courses. Similarly to the findings of Curtin et al. (2007), collaboration between academics and support personnel was also suggested to enhance academic success.

There appears to be some dichotomies in the research presented. The literature on adult learning recommends the use of social groups to promote academic success (Tinto, 2003; Trice, 2006; Demaris & Kristsonis, 2008; Price, 2005; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2001; Kemp, 2010). In contrast, the literature specifically on international students (Gillett & Baskerville, 2012; Curtin et al. 2007; Cheng et al. 2004) reports that international students do not value social group learning. Trice’s (2004) research espouses the benefit to international students when they engage in more social interactions with native English speakers; they are more acculturated to the US. This social isolationism is a common theme in the literature on international graduate students, particularly doctoral students (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011; Trice & Yoo, 2007). The question remains as whether this is a cultural influence that should be respected, or should international students be encouraged to interact with the native English speakers.

There are many established practices for teaching international students. What is interesting to note, is that these aforesaid practices are also viable approaches to teaching all adult learners regardless of their county of origin. Below are several best practices that may benefit international students in your classroom.

- Develop activities that encourage problem solving and learning by doing.
- If the method is lecture, the instructor should be “an expert, maybe funny, told stories, left the script, but was knowledgeable and conveyed the big picture” (Gillett & Baskerville, 2012, p. 165).
- Use minimally power point presentations.
- Incorporate workforce skills into the course.
- Informational literacy education should be integrated into the course rather than taught as discreet skills.
- Oral presentations and writing workshops should be offered to students.
- Develop a pre-enrollment course with content-based instruction.
- Develop language support noncredit courses parallel to content courses
- Develop cross-disciplinary relationships between academics and support personnel.
- Develop strong advisory programs.

The question concerning the use of social learning with international students might be addressed by
implementing these types of activities and assignments gradually into the course. As students become more proficient in their language skills, social learning opportunities could be increased.

International students face many challenges as they enter higher education settings in the U.S. Understanding both their intellectual and emotional needs is the first step in helping them make successful transitions. Collaboration among institutional entities and communication with the students are key elements in ensuring their fulfillment.

References
available online at: http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/Learning%20Better%20Together.pdf.


