

# Internationalising Assessment, Learning And Teaching

## An Opinion Piece<sup>\*</sup>

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As someone fascinated by the diversity and eclecticism of higher education pedagogy, this paper offers a reflection on some of the various approaches adopted to higher education pedagogy in tertiary colleges and universities globally. Working as a consultant in between six and ten nations annually for more than two decades has caused me to ponder these divergences, and here I seek to consider some of them, and illuminate practices both for staff working outside their home nations and for those teaching international students.

Diverse approaches to the language of teaching

It is famously said that America and England are two nations divided by a single language and that is certainly the case in terms of the terminology of higher education teaching among Anglophone nations. 'Faculty' in the US means teaching staff, while in the UK it is a term describing organisational systems. The term 'Administrators' refers largely to secretarial and clerical staff in Ireland and the UK, but implies the senior staff running universities in the US. Anyone (like me) inviting an American expert on 'Classroom Assessment' to speak at a UK

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conference might usefully bear in mind that the US use of the term 'assessment' is commonly what in the UK would be termed evaluation (i.e. how students assess their teachers) and vice versa! The term 'compensation' in the UK means what additional work needs to be done to remediate a failed assignment but in at least one Eastern European nation means the payment that needs to be made to the tutor to compensate for their extra time and energy necessary to support a failing student to progress. The learning point here is to never assume that everyone is 'singing from the same hymn sheet' (to use a common Western expression which is meaningless in societies where hymns aren't sung). Such issues are what to people in some latitudes are known as 'the tip of the iceberg' but which are known to some in Africa as the 'nose of the hippopotamus'!

#### Diverse approaches to teaching and learning

Notions underpinning what comprises learning and teaching vary from country to country (Wisker 2001): in some nations the job of the effective teacher is to impart an accepted body of knowledge so effectively that students can replicate what they have learned, while others expect students at higher education level to adopt critical approaches to what they learn and to be able to formulate and express individual opinions (Ryan 2004). Mismatches between these approaches can interfere with student achievement and lead to high levels of failure and drop out. Irish and UK students finding themselves expected to learn by heart large volumes of academic content can be daunted by the sheer scale of the task, while students who have mastered this approach can feel undermined when they find this isn't sufficient to satisfy those marking their assignments, but who are seeking analysis and evaluation.

Students from Greece or the People's Republic of China have been known to get angry with staff when they ask for the title of the course text with which they need to familiarise themselves, only to be told to 'read around' a lengthy booklist in a process completely beyond their experience. What staff see as fostering independence and autonomy can be interpreted as neglect of duties by students used to a different paradigm.

### Diverse approaches to assessment

How long is an exam? How many words is an essay expected to comprise at university? To what extent are multiple choice tests used? Are there expectations of students being assessed in groups? Working in a single nation, academics often don't appreciate that the answers to these questions are different in different parts of the world (Brown and Joughin, 2007). Exams lasting up to nine hours are used in certain parts of Scandinavia, while in some areas of the Indian sub-continent high-achieving students will enter university having never taken an exam with a duration of longer than an hour. Similarly students who've always done well in assignments in a second language no longer than 1,000 words long may struggle when faced with several essays required with similar deadlines, each 2,500 or 3,000 words long. MCQs (multiple-choice questions) are extensively used in the US but much less so in some other nations. While Irish and British students will often encounter group assignments in school, until recently group assessment was against the law in Danish Universities and remains uncommon in many nations outside Europe. Within the European Economic Community, further diversity exists in relation to the extent that live oral (Viva voce) examinations are used, being common in the Netherlands and parts of Scandinavia but largely confined to PhDs in the UK and Ireland.

Expectations of good academic conduct vary also: plagiarism can seem an alien context in nations where extensively citing canonical authors is so accepted that acknowledging familiar sources may seem unnecessary, when everyone is expected to know such works well. How many students in England and Ireland, for example, consider it essential to reference well-known biblical expressions in their writing? So, for some students perhaps from Confucian heritage nations it may be advisable to discuss what kind of referencing is required to avoid accusations of plagiarism.

The implication for academics working with cohorts with mixed national backgrounds is that assessment methodologies and approaches may need to be explained and rehearsed before live use, if students are to maximise their achievements, and avoid inappropriate preparation techniques.

#### Diverse approaches to staff/student interactions

As Ryan and Carroll (2005) have indicated, the metaphorical and literal distances between academics and students vary widely. In some nations, teachers adopt an almost parental closeness to students, seeing their learning as a personal responsibility and being readily available for individual consultation, whereas in others contact outside the lecture room is actively discouraged and tutorial support has to be paid for as an extra. Unmatched expectations on levels of support can lead to frustration and distress on both sides. Staff can be annoyed by students failing to ask questions in class and then waiting around at the end to bring queries to teachers who have to rush off to other classes, not realising for example that in some Pacific Rim nations staff deployment allows for up to an hour for post-lecture individual consultations. Email responses to academic queries within the hour are normal in some national contexts and strongly discouraged in others.

In nations like the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland, staff may encourage informal and social contact with students on first name terms, which some Eastern European and Asian colleagues might find very uncomfortable (Ryan and Carroll, 2005, *op cit*). The relative acceptability of strong eye contact (considered very rude in some societies), touching and close physical proximity is not the same everywhere and offence is easily caused when unfamiliar boundaries are unwittingly crossed.

Offence can be caused on both sides when students from cultures (for example Japan, where gift giving is a societal norm) offer presents to staff who then refuse to take them, particularly if they are expensive or if the timing coincides with assignment marking.

At least one Irish Institute of Technology has a notice advising students that gifts to teachers should be low in value and ideally something like food that can be shared between the tutor and fellow students.

#### Diverse transactional relationships

Students who are paying substantial fees (equivalent to the purchase of a high end automobile in nations such as the UK) or more modest but potentially increasing Administration fees (as in Ireland) may well view their relationships with Higher Education Institutions differently from those in many areas of continental Europe where higher education remains free. In cases where students and their families are contributing substantially to the costs of university study, they are likely to perceive themselves as consumers or customers rather than clients or grateful recipients, with high expectations of value-for-money and service standards. It can be uncomfortable for senior staff like me when I was a PVC of a large metropolitan UK university, dealing with failing or dissatisfied students (or more frequently their parents) who sought refunds for cancelled classes or assurances of better assessment outcomes since they were paying for their educations and having to explain that this wasn't possible.

#### Diverse approaches to technologies

There tends to be an assumption nowadays that all students are completely au fait with 'everyday technologies' including PCs, laptops, smart phones, mobile devices and so on, and while this is true for many nations like Singapore, where digital literacy tends to be well ahead of that in Europe, for some students their day-to-day experience of using such devices may be more sporadic. They may come from nations where such technologies are available, but a regular electricity supply is not, or from family contexts where multiple users share sometimes

elderly equipment. Increasingly universities where high fees are charged are considering providing students with individual or loan equipment to even out these disadvantages, together with the practical support necessary to help students make good use of the equipment. Some even pre-load supplied kit with required software, study skills materials and electronic course readers or full essential texts, bought at advantageous rates from acute publishers.

#### Diverse approaches to student support

What exactly students can expect from their teachers in terms of tutorial support is not universally identical. Some students will have experienced careful working through of draft work with multiple opportunities for feedback and with the tutor proof-reading text carefully, while others will have no such expectations. Problems arise when students feeling isolated and alienated seek help from tutors they find cold and unresponsive, while the tutors concerned may develop a view of students from certain nations as being needy and demanding. Prospectuses, websites and course handbooks need to be very explicit about what kinds of help is on offer and about the extent to which autonomous learning is expected.

#### Conclusions

The processes of fostering international perspectives on learning and teaching require a thoughtful and nuanced approach, with academics from different nations accepting that the approaches with which they are most familiar are not necessarily ubiquitous or considered universally to be desirable. The best ways to broach any such divisions, in my opinion, is by opening up and continuing a dialogue between nations, and for this reason I welcome the internationalisation of the AISHE-J board and am honoured to have been invited to be your first International member.

## References

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