

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or  
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Empowering International Students as Global Citizens: Promising  
Praxis for Virtual Global Learning**

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**Abstract**

*The COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted the traditional ways of providing global learning to students in higher education, and offered international students new opportunities to develop intercultural competency in a virtual environment. Anchored in literature, teaching reflection, student reflection, and critical global citizenship education theory and practices, this article analyzes and discusses the andragogic, cultural, linguistic, academic, and technological dimensions of providing meaningful and inclusive global learning and engagement to international students in a virtual/online environment. Placing international students at the centre of critical academic decisions, this article introduces promising practices and strategies for empowering international students as global citizens, such as dealing with sociocultural and geopolitical issues, preparing international students for online learning, creating an open and safe online environment, situating intercultural learning and collaboration in authentic contexts, and practicing critical reflexivity.*

**Keywords:** online education, international students, critical global citizenship, global learning, diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education

## **Introduction**

Living, studying, and working in a globally interconnected world, global competencies and citizenship are important for all leaders, professionals, and citizens today. This is a key reason why there were over 5.3 million students studying outside of their home countries (UIS, 2021). In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted the traditional ways of providing global learning and intercultural competence development opportunities for international students in higher education. Universities and colleges had no choice, but to take immediate action to explore transformative, innovative, and sustainable policies, and praxis to deliver global and intercultural learning through mainstream teaching and learning, the core academic mission of higher education. This shift means that both instructors and international students are experiencing new opportunities and challenges in the process of teaching and learning. Anchored in literature, research, conceptual development, and practices of critical global citizenship education, this article analyzes and discusses the andragogic, cultural, linguistic, academic, and technological dimensions of providing meaningful global learning and engagement to international students in an inclusive virtual/online environment.

## **Literature Review**

Driven by growth in middle classes in Asia and Africa, the number of students pursuing higher education has grown continually over the past two decades and the demand for higher education is set to increase from 227 million students in 2019 to over 414 million by 2030 (UIS, 2021). Publicly funded universities and colleges face growing pressure to fulfill their public responsibilities in preparing a well-educated citizenry and workforce for sustainable economic, human, and social development in the digital age (Marshall, 2018; Rampersad, 2020). Internationalization has been adopted as a core strategy, in global higher education, to maintain national and institutional advantages in the global economy; to make up for declining public funding from governments through revenue-generation services and programs; to compete for the best and brightest students and faculty; to upgrade competitiveness, ranking through international research and publication; and to prepare human capital for organizations and societies locally, nationally, and internationally (Stein, 2016).

The benefits of internationalization include providing global learning for developing globally minded and cross-culturally competent individuals, fostering multiple perspectives and collaboration for innovation, increasing knowledge production and translation, accessing global talents and markets, generating new revenue, enhancing an institution's academic reputation through new programs or services, and risk sharing through cooperative innovation (Deardorff, de Wit, Heyl, & Adams, 2018; Guo-Brennan, 2020; Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Over the past decades, internationalization planning, strategies, and practices in global higher education have mostly been driven by neoliberalism, a belief that markets are the most efficient mode for decision-making and the optimal way to promote human welfare (Harvey, 2007; Knight, 2015). Decisively regulated by the market and serving as the means of making up reduced public funding due to reduced governmental intervention, universities and colleges are forced to join the global competition for talent, ranking, and revenue-making (Bamberger, Morris, & Yemini, 2019). The existing internationalization policy, models, and practices face several ethical challenges and concerns for higher educational leadership, teaching, learning, and services, including the dilemma between national jurisdiction and the responsibility towards global justice,

uneven access to quality global education, epistemic dominance and exclusion in education, lack of criticality and solidarity in global learning, and new demands from digital internationalization and interconnection (de Wit, 2020).

International students are the most important stakeholders in international higher education. Their diverse sociocultural, linguistic, academic and personal backgrounds, and needs, require universities and colleges to address common challenges and issues, including racism and neo-racism, underappreciated complex identities, and lack of culturally responsive curriculum and instruction (Kuokkanen, 2008; Lee, 2017). These challenges require thorough inclusive educational policies, processes, and practices that affect their academic, personal, and professional development (Guo-Brennan, et. al, 2020). Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is recommended as an ethical position, as well as an interdisciplinary framework for helping all students develop the worldview and higher-order competencies for living and working in a time that is characterized by global interconnection, diversity, and new technological demands (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019; UNESCO, 2015/2018). As a lens, viewing and conducting education with global perspectives, GCED engages students in cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural transformations by exploring concepts, such as global interdependence, social justice, conflict and conflict resolution, media and perception, and sustainable development. Learners are exposed to ideas, values, and cultures, different from their own, and are encouraged to nurture their appreciation for global interdependence, human diversity, social justice, peace, and sustainable civic engagement (Banks, 2016). Global citizenship education, conducted through this critical lens, challenges the traditional world order built on colonialism, deconstructs traditional knowledge and power boundaries, and constructs new knowledge that includes diverse world views and ways of knowing. It creates curriculum space for learners to analyze the interdependence of peoples and cultures; reflect on their contexts, beliefs, social relationships, and the distribution of power and resources in both local and global communities; understand the origins of assumptions and the implications of these assumptions; and develop critical skills of cross-cultural engagement and conflict resolutions (Andreotti, 2016).

## **Methods**

Having been engaged in international education and global engagement in different academic capacities, the authors of this article were teaching international students in different educational and institutional contexts, while working closely as the instructor and participants in an online graduate program. Collectively, they have taught 363 international students, who come from 22 different countries and participated in online learning from 9 different countries. Their shared interest in improving curriculum and instruction, particularly around the issues of diversity, globalization, social justice, and international education have drawn them to work together to examine equitable and inclusive practices in providing high quality online education to international students. Critical teaching reflection is adopted as the methodology, as it involves the examination of sociocultural and political spheres to enable alternative actions by practitioners, and to assist educators to analyze the needs of students alongside dominant knowledge and perspectives inherent in educational systems, policies, curriculum, and practices (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Rankine, 2019). Sources of data include documents, teaching reflections, teaching observations, students' learning reflections, and online forum posts. Pseudonyms and pseudo-genders are used to protect students' information.

## **Results**

### **Sociocultural and Geopolitical Issues**

Faculty experienced tremendous stress associated with learning about the online learning-management systems, digital tools, and how to communicate with students; as well as posting assignments, archiving notes, and managing discussion forums in an online environment. Challenges experienced by faculty included conducting exams online, scheduling difficulties in synchronous learning with different time zones, and blocked learning management platforms and resource websites, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Google suite in mainland China. Without prior experience dealing with Chinese Internet restrictions, the faculty found it extremely challenging to adopt various online materials in courses, such as video (associated with a textbook), students' low online engagement, plagiarism in online environments, and English as a foreign language for teaching and learning.

### **Preparing International Students for Online Education**

High-quality online education requires faculty members to spend a substantial amount of upfront time designing and developing online courses in collaboration with a team of instructional designers, production specialists, multimedia specialists, and other support personnel. The majority of international students in our classes participated in online learning for the first time. Students, faculty, and academic administrators with no experience in online education or instructional design often perceive online courses as inferior to face-to-face offerings. This results in barriers to online learning engagement, administrative structure, technical expertise, training and support, technological infrastructure, faculty/student experience, and adequate compensation (Allen & Seaman, 2014). These barriers can be observed at all levels: learning, teaching, administrative, and institutional leadership (Li, et al, 2021). During the sudden mid-semester shift from face-to-face classes to emergency remote instruction and learning, faculty did not have the time to develop high-quality online course structures, nor did international students have proper digital devices or working spaces for online education. We also observed other challenges students experienced, such as difficulties adjusting to the changes related to faculty presence, learning engagement, and socio-cultural interactions. For the students with low-language proficiency, the increased use of written English for communication, sharing, and engagement was a challenge.

We anticipated that many international students would report that online learning was new and challenging to them. Preparing international students to engage in online learning through pre-class activities can deepen learning engagement and outcomes. This section introduces the specific strategies to prepare international students for global learning. Students' learning reflections clearly indicated that the intentional preparation resulted in positive online learning experiences.

## **Create an Open and Safe Online Learning Environment**

In an online environment, international students' diverse professional identities, characterized by the dynamic intersections of different sociocultural contexts, language, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, nationality, and gender, are not only organic sources for understanding and appreciating global interdependence and complexities of global challenges, but involve tensions and controversies arising from different sociocultural and political situations (Guo-Brennan, 2020). A safe and open environment for expanding perspectives, improving cross-cultural understanding, engaging in collaborative problem-solving, and analyzing complex and controversial issues in a reflective and critical manner is critical for engaging all learners. This section recommends the strategies of creating a safe and open environment for making global learning beneficial to all students.

## **Internationalize Curriculum for Inclusive Intercultural Learning**

Curriculum internationalization is not only important for meaningful global learning, but also critical for making curriculum inclusive and relevant to diverse learners, particularly international students from different countries. This section introduces specific strategies to make intentional curriculum internationalization an ongoing and engaged process of global learning.

## **Situate Intercultural Learning in Authentic Contexts**

International students are genuinely interested in learning from the host cultures, but most importantly, their backgrounds and experiences allow them to serve as powerful sources of intercultural learning. Intercultural learning can be powerful, authentic, and profound; the students are provided with the opportunities to analyze real-world issues and their impact on personal and professional lives (Gregg, et. al. 2020). Many digital tools, such as Google Drive and Office 365 OneDrive, are useful tools to facilitate intercultural collaboration and group learning. Using a shared document allows international students to share their ideas with their group and the class, without always speaking up. The diverse ways of sharing, such as written, audio, and visual, accommodate students' different learning styles. This section also introduces strategies that motivate students' continuous engagement in intercultural learning.

## **Practice Critical Reflexivity**

In virtual global learning and engagement, international students' diverse sociocultural contexts and backgrounds allow meaningful exchanges and authentic reflections on colonial and racist relations and power hierarchies of workplaces and societies. When given the opportunities to critically reflect on their own subjectivities and the implications for power, privilege, and marginalization in policy and practices, students have the opportunities to deconstruct the interplay between the personal and professional, and the local and the global, in personal and professional lives.

## **Reduce Feelings of Anxiety**

In an online environment, the lack of relationship-building with international students can add to the social isolation brought on by the pandemic (Chandler, 2016). This section introduces strategies to use breakout sessions to decrease students' anxiety and increase engagement in synchronous learning.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The swift shift to online and remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic invites institutions and faculty to place students, including international students, at the center of critical academic decisions related to online education. What are faculty and students' levels of digital fluency? What do students need for online learning? Are we offering what is best for them and their learning? Which technology to use? What kinds of assignments are meaningful? What should we require them to read and watch? Should we use a synchronous or asynchronous approach? These questions cannot be solely addressed at an individual level, and most importantly, must be addressed through institutional governance, policies, and structures that impact online teaching and learning: administrative structure, scheduling, financial aid, student support, grading policies, educational technologies, instructional designing support and training.

Teaching, assessing, and supporting international students, in an online and remote environment, requires instructional designing knowledge, skills, and practices with global perspectives, as well as a strong commitment to inclusive quality education for all (Adhikari, 2018). Global Citizenship Education provides a theoretical and practical framework for offering inclusive global learning and education to all students. It opens the space for connecting teaching and curriculum with international students' different ways of knowing and cultural identities, and empowers them to become active citizens and leaders who can contribute to the greater equity and inclusion in higher education, the society, and the world.

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