

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

**Supporting International Graduate Students:  
Lessons from a Fall 2020 Non-Credit Course**

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**Abstract**

*This paper discusses a non-credit pass/fail course that is designed to support international graduate students as they begin their graduate studies at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Specifically, the paper considers how the course was redesigned in Fall 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and a university-wide shift to remote teaching and learning. I share my experience redesigning and facilitating the course, as informed by a pedagogy of care within an online context. Special consideration is given to course structure and student engagement, as well as general lessons learned from the experience, including some of the advantages of teaching the course online (e.g., increased student numbers).*

*Keywords:* international graduate students, online teaching, student experience, transition and orientation

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to share my experiences teaching a non-credit course for international graduate students (Academic Preparation for International Graduate Students) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the university's shift to remote teaching and learning, I needed to redesign the course for online delivery in the Fall 2020 semester. Here, I share insights into course structure, student engagement, and general lessons learned. In sharing these experiences, I aim to engage other instructors and staff who work with international graduate students to reflect on different ways we might support this population. As Canadian universities continue to recruit and enroll international graduate students, it is essential that these students are sufficiently supported, so that they are able to successfully complete their graduate programs.

## **Literature Review**

While international students experience many of the same challenges as domestic students when entering a graduate program (e.g., time and project management, student-supervisor relationships, financial hardship, feelings of isolation) (Charles, Karnaze & Leslie, 2021; Kalubi et al, 2020), these students often experience additional stressors that reflect educational, cultural and/or linguistic differences. For instance, international students may need to adjust to new classroom and/or assessment practices, learn different working norms, as well as manage language limitations and/or communication challenges (Mackie & Shiabo, 2011; Palmer 2016). Given these potential challenges, the University of Saskatchewan initiated a non-credit course to better support their international graduate students. This course is open to international MA and PhD students across all disciplines. The course is intended to provide students a space to openly engage with the hidden curriculum of graduate school (Calarco, 2020), and to learn and practice key academic skills (e.g., research, writing). The course is also a venue for students to connect with each other in a low-stakes environment, so that they can develop a peer network that extends beyond their area of study. Originally, this course was taught in-person, however this paper explains how the course pivoted to online delivery as a result of COVID-19.

## **Methods**

My approach to redesign was informed by informal reflection. I was initially concerned about how the course would function in an online space, in part because of the challenges international students may encounter when studying online (Karkar-Esperat, 2018), as well as my own inexperience designing an online course. To overcome these worries, I first reflected on student feedback from the previous cohort. Survey data from these students was very positive, but at the same time identified scope to improve engagement. For instance, many students had particularly appreciated insights into Canadian society, so I made this a more intentional part of the online course by featuring it as a weekly, optional theme with which they could engage and explore. This modification was in line with what incoming students identified as being of interest to them. When surveyed about why they enrolled in the course, 93.1% of respondents indicated that they wanted to learn more about Canada. Other motivations included a desire to adjust to graduate school culture (96.6%), to develop academic writing skills (96.6%), to learn more about the university (89.7%), to learn skills (e.g., time management, reading strategies) (89.7%), to

connect with other graduate students (86.2%), and to connect with university community (86.2%).

I also reflected on my own experiences as an online learner; in the last fifteen years, I have completed nearly a dozen university and professional training courses. The courses that I most valued were ones that had an active instructor presence and were easy to navigate. This informed my decision to ensure that each discussion post would be acknowledged by either myself or my student assistant. The university's adoption of Canvas as the learning management system made it easy to organize information, and as I had used the platform while a student at other institutions, was able to incorporate that experience into the visual design of the course.

Lastly, due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, I recognized that students would require extra support and understanding throughout the term. These students had planned to study in Canada, in-person, and this plan was dramatically upended with many now studying from halfway around the world. In my reflection, I recognized that the course redesign would be framed via a pedagogy of care popularized by Nel Noddings in the 1980s (Karakaya, 2020; Rose & Adams, 2014). I interpret care as embodying flexibility, sharing, and empathy, and applied these considerations when redesigning the course.

Nearly half of the students were outside of the province and/or the country, which meant that time zone differences and/or Internet bandwidth issues would have created obstacles for many, if required to attend live sessions. Consequently, I made the course asynchronous and relied on weekly discussions to guide engagement. Students could choose from a range of readings, and occasional videos, with which to engage and reference in their posts each week. All course materials were integrated into Canvas, or were otherwise publicly available to help mitigate access concerns.

I also wanted students to feel that the class was a welcoming space, and made intentional use of photos and videos to humanize the online experience. With this in mind, I created videos in which I introduced the key themes of the week. These videos simply featured me speaking directly to the camera, while working from my kitchen table (my workspace during much of the pandemic). Occasionally these videos were more informal, such as when I demonstrated how I dress for Saskatoon winters—important, as the temperature can sometimes drop below -40C. I also regularly took pictures of the city and posted these to our Social Corner, so that students who had yet to arrive in the country, would have a better sense of what to expect.

Similar storytelling elements were incorporated into how I situated many of our weekly themes, drawing on my own experiences of living and working overseas and being a graduate student. These themes were divided into three strands: Transition into Graduate School, Writing Strategies, and Canadian Culture. To ensure flexibility, only the first featured mandatory readings and discussions, whereas students were free to engage with the others as much, or as little, as possible, depending on their interests, needs and/or schedules. Transition subthemes included topics ranging from planning for success in one's program, to academic integrity and the writing process, to traditional ways of knowing.

The switch to online learning also required changes to assessment; though the course was Pass/Fail, I required that students complete a number of assignments throughout the term. Discussion posts were assessed based on completion (e.g., word count and reference to weekly materials) rather than language. These posts helped build to larger assessments, including a final formal reflection that could take the form of a short video or essay. Students were also required to complete academic integrity quizzes, an annotated bibliography on a research topic of their choosing, and a mini-literature review on the same topic. A challenge, for credit option, was also

available for students who had already published in an English-language academic journal, so that they could opt out of the literature review assignment, if so desired.

## **Results**

Twenty students completed the end-of-course, student learning experience questionnaire, representing just under half of the 44 enrolled students. All were positive in their responses, with 65% reporting an excellent learning experience, 30% a very good experience, and 5% a good experience. These numbers were augmented with individual comments on quality of instruction, opportunities to develop and demonstrate subject-specific skills, and overall quality of the learning experience. Of the nearly 50 comments, only three indicated any scope for improvement (e.g., “My suggestion will be that the reading materials may be shorter to focus on a subchapter or a short article” and “It was great, but could be better, such as giving enough samples that would guide students to write as they want us to write.”).

The vast majority, however, commented on the value of the course. As one student wrote, “I appreciated the course ... Being an international student and living in another country sometimes made me feel a little disconnected. This discipline was a great opportunity to connect me with the USask community and help me discover skills to deal with the challenges.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Overall, despite initial concerns about taking the course online, positive feedback from students helped to assuage my worries. That noted, one drawback of teaching the course online was a lower survey response rate (in Fall 2019, the response rate was 75% when the survey was completed in class, compared with the 45.5% response rate in Fall 2020). It is difficult to ascertain whether the students who did not complete the survey equally benefited from the course.

Still, I did come to recognize certain advantages when teaching the course online, despite missing aspects of the in-person course. For instance, while it is common for a handful of students to dominate in-person classroom discussions (in small-group and whole-group contexts), students could learn from a greater number of their peers via the discussion forum.

Likewise, the course was able to attract and retain a greater number of students compared with the previous in-person offering, increasing by 37.5%. Reasons for this increase may have reflected the desire to stay connected during uncertain times (as noted by some in the end-of-course survey) and/or the ease of scheduling asynchronous courses.

Another unanticipated benefit was that the course itself became a resource beyond the official end date, with several students requesting that it be kept open during the winter break, so that they could engage with materials they did not have time to review during the term. This also spoke to the value students placed in the course materials, which was encouraging. Students also appreciated my policy of responding to all discussion posts (whether these comments came from me or my student assistant). In the end-of-course survey, one student noted appreciation for this policy, writing “[s]he commented on every submission on the canvas by every student and that was amazing.”

The course will remain remote in Fall 2021, but a hybrid version will be piloted in Winter 2022. Future possibilities include offering the course remotely in summer, as a longer pre-orientation for incoming international graduate students, and/or running an online and hybrid

course in parallel, to give students more choices when creating their schedules. These steps could have the added benefit of accommodating more international students to ease the well-documented transition challenges of this population.

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