

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

**Focus on relationships and strengths:
Engaging international learners online**

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Abstract

The shift to online courses during the global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that teaching and learning online is an evolving practice for both students and educators. Notably, for international students challenges with learning online can be more pronounced as they are also adapting to cultures of their host country and expectations from their post-secondary institutions, while attempting to forge connections with their domestic peers. This paper describes several notable pedagogical interventions implemented by the author in her Canadian-based online, asynchronous courses that have a high number of international students. These include repurposing office hours, reporting on student feedback, and incorporating Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the course content. Course evaluations and student testimonials are featured to demonstrate the effectiveness of these interventions in enhancing faculty-student relationships, student engagement, and individual and collective learning. Practical strategies that encourage international students to integrate life experience into the curriculum are offered to help educators consider how they, in their own disciplines and teaching contexts, can stimulate curiosity and leverage student prior knowledge.

Keywords: Online learning, international students, faculty-student relationships, student engagement, teaching strategies.

Introduction

It is estimated that over 500,000 international students are pursuing post-secondary studies in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2021). Despite a decrease in international student enrollment in 2020 largely due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, it is anticipated Canada will remain a popular destination for international students to study and apply for permanent residency.

International students recognize the high quality of Canada's higher education system and its reputation as a non-discriminatory and safe country (CBIE, 2018). However, upon arrival, many students face challenges adapting to post-secondary educational expectations and the learning environment; they also experience issues forging meaningful connections with faculty and fellow (domestic and international) students. Both of these aspects were exacerbated with the primary shift to online learning during the pandemic. Post-secondary educators play a critical role in addressing both of these issues and contributing towards an international student's successful academic experience.

Adapting to Post-Secondary Expectations and Environment

International students face transitional issues when adjusting to a new academic culture where implicit expectations are not often made explicit by educators (Blasco, 2015; Chang & Gomes, 2017). According to Page (2021), international students experience challenges when attempting to reconcile educational norms or 'scripts' between their previous and current academic contexts, resulting in confusion and frustration when they cannot attain the same level of academic success. Their struggle can be perceived by educators and fellow students as lacking the ability to be a critical thinker and active course participant, especially if they have trouble expressing their perspectives in English (Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). As a result, international students can be misunderstood or even discriminated against because of their seeming inability to communicate effectively. This also contradicts their impression of Canada as a study destination that values cultural diversity and tolerance.

Typically, when courses are facilitated in-person, the physical classroom and faculty office provide an organic opportunity for students to connect with educators and each other (Yates, & Thi Quynh Tang, 2012). However, in the online environment – notably in courses delivered asynchronously – additional effort and initiative are required for students to approach faculty for help and to socialize with peers (Kung, 2017). Faculty also typically have fewer meaningful opportunities to interact face-to-face (even virtually) with students and are thus less likely to detect student issues until they receive students' first assignment submissions. This can often take place weeks into their courses when interventions may not be timely.

Forging Meaningful Connections

In a survey of over 3,000 international students at 25 Canadian colleges and universities, 56% of respondents reported not having any Canadian students as friends, with 37% stating they experienced difficulties becoming acquainted with Canadian students (CBIE, 2015). Research also suggests that international students tend to interact more often with students of similar backgrounds and have a preference to form friendships with those in similar cultural and language groups (Dunne, 2009; Eisenclas and Trevaskes, 2007). By engaging primarily with

peers from similar cultural backgrounds, international students forgo the benefits of forming connections with other students that could increase cultural awareness (Arkoudis et al., 2010), sense of belonging, and academic persistence for both student groups (Brazelton, 2020; Huijser & Kimmins, 2008; O’Shea et al., 2015). Additionally, the online environment increases an international student’s anonymity as a classroom participant, catering to their often innate reluctance to participate in discussions and activities as doing so might reveal their lack of language skills; this further deprives them of the opportunity to meaningfully connect with domestic students (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014).

Leveraging a Relational Strengths-Based Teaching Approach

At a curricular level, addressing the two key challenges in an online environment requires faculty to first and foremost adopt a relationship-centred, strengths-based approach. Fostering high-quality relationships by creating purposeful interactions enables faculty to emphasize and clarify expectations. It also positions educators as open and approachable, resulting in the higher likelihood of students asking for support when needed (Smith et al., 2019). Infusing a strengths-based approach in course content and activities will enable international students to leverage their lived-experience, tell their story, and better connect with their peers. The next section features a curricular case study that demonstrates these principles in action, which can be applied to the majority of courses across a variety of disciplines.

The Case of an Online Course on Career Development

ARTS 299 Exploring University and Career is a three-credit course offered at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in British Columbia, Canada. Open to students with at least nine university-level credits, the course is a popular elective with international students, especially for those completing two-year diploma programs who are looking to map out their post-graduation career plan and considering ways to leverage their educational experience. Course outcomes include:

- Identifying personal and professional values that inform academic and career decisions, and creating an individualized action plan that aligns with these values
- Exploring transferable skills and experiences acquired in academia and other life roles, and articulating their relevance to one’s future career aspirations
- Investigating and leveraging career information and labour market trends to continuously inform career/life planning and decision making
- Incorporating Indigenous Ways of Knowing as part of an ongoing, reflexive career development process

ARTS 299 is offered every semester (Fall, Winter, Summer) through typically three to five sections of 36 students per section. Originally designed to be primarily asynchronous with weekly modules and three to four in-person classes throughout each term. During the pandemic, in-person components shifted online and adjustments were made in Fall 2020 to promote the relational and strengths-based aspects of the course. These adjustments, along with student testimonials, are described in the next several sections.

Repurposing Office Hours and Feedback

In the online learning environment, having intentional opportunities for conversations and connections becomes critical to student success (Ho, 2021), especially for international students. In ARTS 299, these opportunities included repurposing office hours and feedback mechanisms for students and the instructor.

Weekly office hours were scheduled to coincide with the launch of a new learning module. These became referred to as “launch parties.” The instructor spent the first 10 to 15 minutes virtually walking students through the new module, explaining how activities and components relate to the course outcomes and their career development, and providing further advice on how to maximize their module learning. Students could then pose questions and request to meet with the instructor individually. Though optional and recorded, in-person attendance rates for these sessions remained between 18 to 20% throughout the Fall 2020 semester, with an additional 40 to 50% of the students viewing each recording. This indicated the desire for students to learn about course expectations, connect with the instructor and fellow students, and furthermore, to strive for a consistent learning routine.

At the conclusion of each module, students were invited to complete an anonymous survey to share their perspective on how they experienced the module in terms of content and delivery. It captured their views on the most useful module components, suggestions for improvement, and any outstanding module- or career-related questions. Survey results were summarized and shared via weekly videos. These also highlighted collective learning and provided further resources to address questions and knowledge gaps raised in the survey comments.

To enhance learning for all students, in addition to individual assignment feedback, the instructor also created assignment debrief videos describing the most common feedback given, highlighting the qualities of top submissions, and reflecting on how students can continue to hone their skills and learning beyond the assignment. Doing so enabled students to review their own submissions and consider how to approach future assignment submissions. This was particularly valuable for international students to determine expectations and identify differences in format, structure, and reflective practice. Furthermore, the debriefs encouraged students to be proactive, as a high number of students (many being international students) followed up promptly with the instructor to seek advice on how to enhance their course performance.

Student Storytelling Using the Medicine Wheel

ARTS 299 also sought opportunities for students to meaningfully connect with one another by sharing their lived experiences. A storytelling approach (Zuhriyah, 2017) was introduced as it invited students to share their own experiences that related to the content; in general students became more engaged as it helped them share something of meaning. Students also acknowledged that when their peers responded to their posts by commenting or asking additional questions, this helped to reinforce their sense of identify and also facilitated greater intercultural learning and acknowledgement.

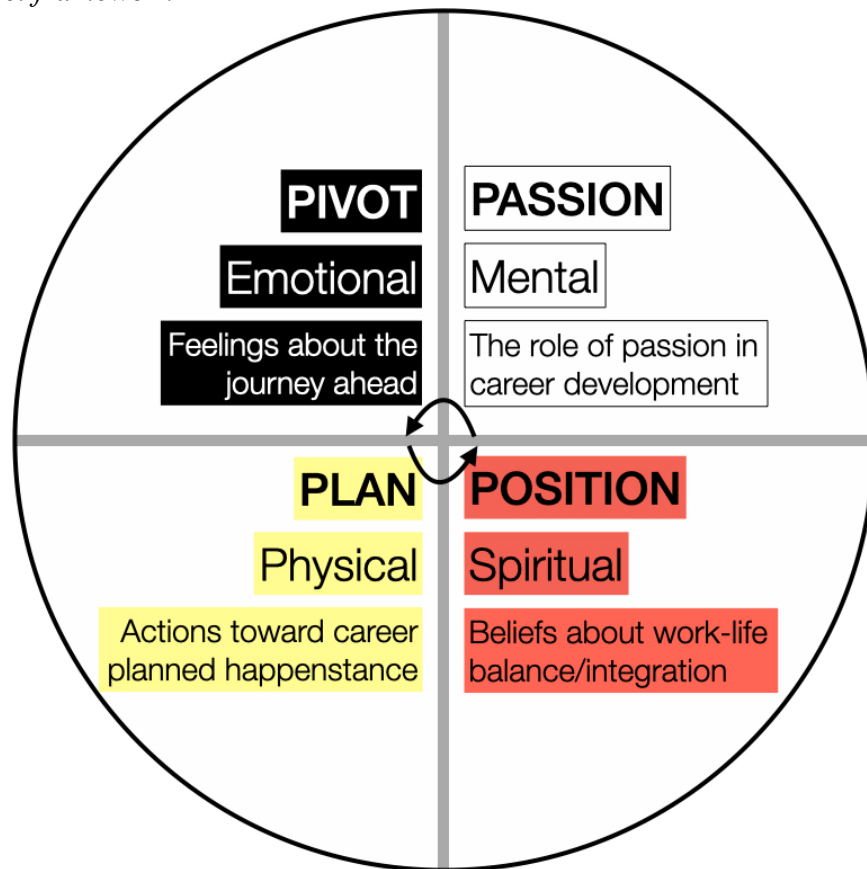
The storytelling element was infused through a four-module series – Plan, Passion, Position, and Pivot – designed with individual reflections and discussion activities to help students consider important topics in career development as they prepare for the remainder of their studies and their future graduation. To help students further their understanding of

Indigenous Ways of Knowing, an Anishinaabe framework, the Medicine Wheel (Bell, 2014), also informed the series (Figure 1).

At this juncture, it is important to point out that the author who taught the course is a non-Indigenous person. Her use of Indigenous knowledge and frameworks in her teaching are based on her own interpretation as a settler and immigrant. They are a part of her ongoing personal effort toward Decolonization, Reconciliation, and Indigenization. In developing this series, she was mentored by an Indigenous teaching learning specialist at her institution, in addition to pursuing further professional development on Indigenous history and learning frameworks.

Figure 1

Four-module series (Plan/Unplan, Passion, Position, and Pivot) mapped onto the Anishinaabe Medicine Wheel framework



Student Reception and Feedback

The efforts made to enhance relationships and student learning were overall well-received by students as indicated in their course evaluations (Table 1) and weekly module feedback.

Table 1

Course evaluation results on items that pertain to the online environment (n=28, 29% response rate out of 98 students)

| Statement | Very strong | Strong | Neutral | Weak | Very weak |
|--|---------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| The instructor's efforts toward creating a good learning atmosphere in the online environment have been | 27 (96%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The instructor's ability to use the online environment effectively | 24 (86%) | 4 (14%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The instructor made the objectives and expectations of the course clear in the online environment | 22 (79%) | 5 (18%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The instructor's ability to answer questions about the course content and methods has been | 26 (93%) | 2 (7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The instructor is accessible online for help of consultation | 25 (89%) | 3 (11%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| The degree to which the instructor is approachable in the online environment to discuss course related matter is | 25 (89%) | 3 (11%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Overall rating of the instructor is | 27 (96%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |

Qualitative comments indicated the students benefitted from a strong instructor presence who cared about student learning and actively sought feedback:

It has been so hard this semester not being able to give feedback to teachers. Professor is one of the only teachers I have heard who asks for weekly updates on students. It is encouraging and helpful.

To be honest, I did not think she was going to do it [the launch parties] every week...she did that all throughout the semester, which I give props for...She also takes the time and ask for feedback from the students. Weekly feedback surveys and simply asking students questions like shows that the instructors embrace a lifelong learner attitude.

Finally, the four-module storytelling series informed by the Medicine Wheel was also appreciated by students, as demonstrated by the following comment:

I liked how you got us [to] reflect on each component by ourselves, and then got us to share our learning with each other at the end [of the course]. I was proud to share my story as an international student.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The pandemic forced most post-secondary educators to embrace a new mode of instruction: online delivery. While all students were impacted by this dramatic shift to a virtual classroom, international students who typically already face more challenges were notably impacted in their ability to connect directly with their instructors and peers on a consistent basis.

As the adoption of online instruction has expanded post-pandemic, the relationship-focused, strengths-based teaching approach employed in ARTS 299 can be adapted to other online courses to enhance relationships, and in turn, student learning. Having regular interactions through hosting launch parties during office hours, creating videos to address questions and concerns and further learning provides consistency and shows the instructors as present, responsive, and caring. Providing opportunities for students to leverage and share their lived experiences to illustrate course content helps them connect with one another and promotes a sense of community.

Though the results from course evaluations and module surveys are encouraging, these are based on self-reported data and therefore are subject to bias (e.g., students who performed well in the class may have an inflated sense of positivity in their comments). Additionally, it is not known what percentage of respondents were international students. In future, it could be valuable to have students at least identify their domestic or international status to see how the results compare across groups.

Additional activities can also be embedded for students to tell their stories and how they personally relate to the content being taught. For example, a prior knowledge survey can be implemented for students to share what they believe they already know about the course topic, their learning goals, and as well, what they see themselves offering to the course community. Obtaining this information would help instructors get to know each student, provide individualized support, and furthermore, leverage the perceived talents of students to help one another and in turn, promote community and learning for all.

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