Brandeis University
Supporting International Students in the Classroom

Like many other colleges and universities in the United States, Brandeis University has experienced a dramatic growth in its international undergraduate student population. At the graduate level, some masters and PhD programs are comprised almost exclusively of international students while others include both domestic and international students.

Within the field of international education, the emphasis has shifted from simply providing support for international students in their academic and co-curricular pursuits to supporting both domestic students and international students as they interact academically in college. Previous research has shown that the classroom is one of the most effective places to integrate domestic and international students. Perhaps this is because students are obliged to interact in class – however minimally – with a wide range of other students that they may not choose to spend out-of-class time with, with the convenient common ground that the class that they are taking together provides. Other research has shown that approximately 40% of international students do not have close friends who are American in spite of wishing to have more interactions with domestic students.\(^1\) International students who do have friendships with domestic students are more likely to participate in the classroom, and to a greater extent in extra-curricular activities outside of the classroom.

The following summarizes ideas from the Committee for the Support of Teaching workshops about best practices Brandeis faculty use to support the academic success of international students. While these methods were designed specifically for international students, many of the techniques are also useful for other student populations including first-generation college students. Still other practices represent good teaching for all students regardless of their background.

**Before Class**

Ask all students to complete a very brief questionnaire, either in hard copy or in LATTE, with questions about their personal and academic background that would be useful to you. Think about a student’s academic background, personal interest in the course, and what western cultural knowledge will be important for success in your course (civil war, human rights, key events in world history, Judeo-Christian culture). Faculty may want to ask specific questions about familiarity with specific cultural concepts and U.S. popular culture references.

Learn students’ names. One professor requires every student to meet with him at least once during office hours, even in classes of 50 students or more. He asks students to “teach me how to pronounce your name.” Another professor who uses a video camera asks every student in his class to say their name for the camera as a way of linking faces to names and learning how to pronounce names correctly. Ask about your pronunciation of names and encourage students to correct your pronunciation as they may be reluctant to do so at first.

Office hours can be an integral opportunity for new students to gain comfort with interacting with professors, as well as to ask questions about the expectations for, and format of, the class in a more safe one-on-one conversation (as compared to asking questions in front of the entire class). The International Students and Scholars Office has recommended that faculty encourage a brief office hours meeting in the first two weeks of class for all students, so that the conversations are without the pressure of initial academic assignments.

Define Expectations

Explain the syllabus and how grades are determined. Explain that “A” students in the US read the syllabus. Ask what is unclear in the syllabus. For all students, it is helpful to have rubrics for each element of grading and to have the instructor explain the standards for each rubric.

Define classroom participation. Many students, especially international students, believe that the only way to participate is to offer a correct answer to a question. Students may not realize that asking a question is also classroom participation. For example, many Chinese students believe that it is disrespectful to interrupt a lecture with a question. In that culture, students are used to waiting until the end of class to speak with the professor. Brandeis faculty may need to explicitly state that students should not wait until after class to ask important questions.

Foster a classroom culture in which it is safe to make mistakes throughout the learning process. Take time to discuss this idea of making mistakes as being part of the learning process, not just in the first week of class but at various points in the semester.

Recognize that international students may not understand why and how certain topics (e.g., religion, politics) are referenced in a class if that is not the primary focus of the course material. Faculty can explain why it is important for students to learn about these aspects of western culture and society.

Understand that international students face pressures that domestic students do not regarding their choice of major and career opportunities. International students who have not secured a job in the United States right after they graduate must return to their home countries. Some areas (e.g. business, the sciences) are more likely to sponsor work visas so international students may stay in the United States if they choose.

During Class

Classroom participation can help both domestic and international students become more willing to interact with peers that they don’t know. At the start of class, divide students into pairs and ask them to "introduce yourselves and tell the person where you are from or what you did this summer (or a different prompt)."

Encourage all students, especially non-native English speakers, to speak during the first week of class. This will facilitate future classroom participation since students who have spoken once in class are much more likely to speak again. Get quieter students to contribute to the discussion by inviting them by name; more often than not, they are pleased to be asked and have thoughtful reflections. International students may be silent without such an overture not because they lack language skills but because participating in classroom discussion is an unfamiliar process to them.

Use "think, pair, share" as a way to encourage brief conversations between matched (non-native English speakers with native English speakers) students in your class.

Consider putting students in small groups assigned by you to ensure the diversity of each group. Give each student a defined role, including reporting back to the entire class. Make sure that non-native English speakers have opportunities to report back as domestic students may unwittingly prevent their international peers from speaking on behalf of the group.

Evaluate student learning by using the “cough test.” Look at the blackboard with your back to the class and ask students to “cough” in response to the question: How many of you understand 50% of this text? Then acknowledge the difficulty of the assignment, provide encouragement and strategies for approaching the text.
Encourage the use of office hours, even in small groups of three or more depending on class size. Positive messaging from faculty in office hours can have a strong influence on an international student's confidence and comfort level.

Provide students with the opportunity to summarize ideas discussed in class in writing or in small group discussion. This will help students better absorb and reflect on key concepts. For international students, it will be helpful in modeling how native speakers convey their thoughts. Explain why it is important to learn to “say things in your own words” to learn the subject matter more deeply.

Take the opportunity in the class to highlight different global/regional/national/cultural perspectives on a particular topic. Having an American student share a perspective, especially where they have a personal connection to the topic, and then specifically calling on an international student who can provide the perspective they have on that same topic (e.g. the media approach to that topic in their country) can reinforce the value of students learning from each other.

Make lecture notes or videotapes of the lectures available after class. This is helpful to students who need to hear the lecture more than once in order to comprehend and understand it. Faculty members who provide notes or videos often link their continued provision of these materials to consistent overall classroom attendance. If attendance drops, the notes will no longer be available.

**Readings**

Don't take for granted that students know how to access readings. Teach them to study the title and ask themselves where and when the book was written. Have them Google the author and find book reviews of the work on a search engine in order to see what other scholars are saying about the piece. By seeing how other scholars agree or disagree with a work, students learn the importance of discourse in learning. Teach students to look up references to other texts, authors, dates.

Teach students reading skills first, such as starting from the title, and reading the first sentence of each paragraph. Prepare students with specific questions or key words when assigning difficult texts to read:

- Why are we reading this?
- Why does this article/book matter?
- What are we meant to learn from this text?
- What are we looking for in the text?
- What are the key points, and where are these points made?

Suggest that students write comments in the margin when reading. Ask them to find three places where they ask: "What in the world were you thinking?" to the author. Students may be reluctant to mark up the text, or to “talk back” to the reading.

Discourage students from overuse of translation. Often the more they translate, the less they understand. The assumption is that the difficulty in understanding is because of the words. In reality the meaning may be uncovered by struggling with the text, looping back and interrogating the text, not by looking up every word.

Articulate the idea of utilizing different reading practices (e.g., different speeds, different levels of attention to detail) according to how the text will be used in class. Sometimes a student needs to skim the material to develop a general understanding of the content, and other times, students need to really scrutinize the argument. Tell students how they might want to approach the reading based on the nature of the assignment. Remind them
that expert readers read recursively, going forward and looping back to try to figure out what the main claim or point of the academic piece is.

Remind students that some readings simply are difficult to comprehend and it's normal to feel challenged by the text. Some students, particularly international students, will think that they are at fault if they do not immediately understand the content or if they have to read material multiple times. Balance the urge to tell students exactly what a text is about to make sure they comprehend the material with recognizing that good learning often occurs when students struggle with a text on their own. Give students some foundation to read the text, a way to get started and feel oriented, explain terms/cultural assumptions they might not have, but don’t obviate the need for them to work on it, too.

**Writing Assignments**
Recognize that the concept of “brainstorming” as a pre-writing exercise is not used by some cultures as an academic technique. For students from cultures that emphasize having a right answer and a wrong answer, the concept of brainstorming can seem counter-intuitive. If you are asking students to brainstorm, explain why this pre-writing practice can be helpful.

Understand that the rules of writing vary in different cultures. In some foreign languages, good writing needn’t feature “topic sentences” and “one idea per paragraph.” (This is itself an over-generalized rule, and may not be valid for all genres of writing in English.) Don’t assume that all international students understand American expectations of academic writing structures.

Explain the definition and purpose of evidence in writing assignments. Teach students how to state the opposing or counter argument, and how to discuss both sides of an argument. Help them understand that there's not always a “right answer” in some essays. If a student is comparing two stories or articles, ask him to make a chart of each story/article to clarify what elements of each he is comparing. Ask the student why he is comparing these two articles or points.

Ask students to "write in your own words" for writing assignments, to help them avoid "mosaic plagiarism" (taking quotes from different, much admired "beautiful sentences" authored by experts in the field).

Be aware that international students may be using "google translate" to translate the words in sentences from their native languages into English. During a writing conference, go through a few sentences to discover what the student is trying to say. Ask what specific phrases or words are intended to mean if they are not comprehensible to you. Encourage students to simplify their language in order to have greater clarity in their writing.

Help students to "notice" their errors. ("Noticing" is a pedagogical term.) Very often students, particularly first-year students, will have multiple areas of their writing that they need to improve. Explain that the student has a limited amount of time to work on her paper, and that you'd suggest she works on a specific issue. Provide students with a writing rubric, and ask them to work on one or two elements of the rubric.

Explain to students that they are being graded on performance of the specific assignment or test, not on their innate ability or value as a person. All students tend to equate grades with self-worth, so it is important to emphasize the process of learning.

Consider giving two grades for a paper, one for content and another for “grammar” and use of English language. In this way, faculty can validate a student’s ideas but also provide accountability for mastery of the English language. Faculty may want to comment on one main grammatical writing error and ask students to revise all such mistakes in the paper. Refer students to the Writing Center; however, help them understand that
the Writing Center is not an editing service, but a means of helping students learn how to understand and revise their own weaknesses in grammar, structure, and argument.

**Collaborative Learning versus Cheating**

Recognize that different cultures have different understandings of collaborative learning and/or plagiarism. Be very explicit in stating what you consider to be cheating. Explain how successful students collaborate with one another, and what the difference is between collaboration and cheating. While it may seem obvious that it is academically dishonest to share old lab reports or papers, instructors need to explain this in class. One might give specific examples of what would be considered cheating or ask students in small groups to discuss whether or not certain “gray” or even “black and white” areas are cheating, or not.

Recognize that students from certain cultures (e.g. China, Russia) may feel obligated to share papers when requested by students from their home country, as an act of loyalty or friendship or of supporting one’s community. Many students do not know how to say "no" to their peers' improper requests, due to cultural reasons. Faculty can acknowledge these types of cultural pressures at the beginning of the semester, and require students to say "no" under such situations. Remind students that this is a form of cheating, and that is it is forbidden by university regulations, and the professor.

**Additional Resources at Brandeis**

**English Language Programs**
For university-sponsored weekly academic writing tutorials, students can download an English Language Tutor Request Form from the ELP webpage. Please note that the completed form must be returned in person to the ELP office (Rabb 340) or emailed to the ELP Program Administrator, Elizabeth Field, at efie@brandeis.edu. If there is a waitlist, students will be given tutors on a first come, first serve basis. Vinodini Murugesan, Director of ELP, is available to consult with individual faculty or departments about how to best support the academic success of international students.

http://www.brandeis.edu/elp/

**The Writing Center**
The Writing Center offers free writing tutorial services to Brandeis University undergraduate and graduate students, and in conjunction with the English Language Program, is now offering a special set of appointments for students who want to concentrate on improving their English grammar. The service is aimed at students for whom English is not their first language, but anyone is welcome to sign up. To make an appointment, students should click on one of the 45-minute slots that are listed as "Grammar."

http://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/writingcenter/

**The International Students and Scholars Office**
The ISSO determines visa eligibility and prepares and issues the visa documents needed for non-immigrant students, scholars and their dependents to obtain visas in order to come to Brandeis University to study, teach and/or conduct research. In addition, the ISSO assists international students, scholars and their dependents with immigration benefits and procedures as well as advice about their rights and responsibilities as non-immigrants living, studying and working in the United States. They also provide guidance to international students and scholars regarding academic, financial and personal issues which may impact their legal status in the U.S., at Brandeis, and the student/scholar’s general well-being.

http://www.brandeis.edu/ioso/index.html
The Center for Teaching and Learning
The Center is built on the conviction that Brandeis faculty and staff have a great deal of knowledge and expertise to offer each other in the service of helping our students learn — and the Center aims to be a place (both physical and intellectual) that supports the exchange of such ideas. The Center also brings resources from the broader world of education studies to campus, including workshops and selected readings and research that faculty rarely have the time to explore.
http://www.brandeis.edu/teaching/index.html

The Committee for the Support of Teaching
The Committee for the Support of Teaching develops policy and procedural recommendations to support the teaching mission of the university and initiates faculty development programs to improve the quality of teaching at Brandeis. Additional resources about teaching international students can be found on their website.
http://www.brandeis.edu/das/committees/cst/faculty-resources.html