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## Title: Working with the teaching profession to support international learner needs

International students contribute to the rich diversity of classrooms in New Zealand. In this topic, teachers will have the opportunity to reflect on different learning styles and how learning styles are influenced by culture. Teachers will also learn useful activities to better support students and to make the most out of the diversity present in their classrooms.

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### 1. Introduction

*Something very magical happens in those classrooms where skilled and caring adults who celebrate diversity are committed to truly inclusive teaching and learning.*

Anne Marie Richardson-Gibbs and M. Diane Klein

Every classroom is diverse in many different ways. Diversity presents itself in terms of gender, sexual orientation, language, religion and cultural background. International students contribute to this rich diversity with their own cultural values and perspectives. This presents a great opportunity but also a potential challenge for students and teachers involved.

International learners usually come from different educational systems and with different beliefs and expectations about learning. In the [Understanding intercultural models in education](#) topic, we introduced cultural value dimensions and communication styles as two of the many ways we can see this diversity in action. Students coming from a more hierarchical or collectivist culture might find that the more egalitarian approach and expectation of independent learning at New Zealand schools and institutions are a bit challenging. Different communication styles can also present some issues in the interaction between students, their peers and their teachers.

It is useful to make sense of international students' perceptions by exploring an outside-looking-in perspective of where they are coming. The New Zealand educational system offers a unique mix of western educational approaches and Mātauranga Māori, and the [Understand New Zealand's education system](#) topic in the Agent's Lab examines some of these unique features.

## 2. How culture influences the way we learn

The way we learn is influenced by many variables: the topic we are learning, our professional focus, life experiences, the context, and our cultural background or "how we have been taught to learn".

International learners enrolling in New Zealand courses bring with them a range of educational influences. Some international students come from educational systems similar to New Zealand's, which includes a focus on independent learning, critical thinking and hands-on projects; others come from very different systems where the one holding the knowledge is the teacher and hierarchy needs to be respected. This means sharing your personal opinion on a topic might not be welcome.

Professor Jin Li in her book *Cultural Foundations of Learning* (2013) introduces research that highlights the influence of learning beliefs and expectations of students. She found that when students were asked for words they relate to learning, 70% of European American students would state *thinking, creativity, critical thinking, curiosity* and *inquiry*, while 70% of the Chinese students would say *lifelong pursuit, humility, respect, hard work* and *persistence*. This research set the basis for her theory of Mind and Virtue orientation in relation to different cultural approaches to learning. Jin Li introduced this difference as the broad difference between the Eastern and the Western way of learning.

While care needs to be taken when making generalisations about Eastern and Western values, it

may be helpful to know that students' different learning styles will likely fall somewhere on a continuum between virtue and mind orientation. Just like value dimensions and communication styles, learning styles can also be viewed as a compass that helps to better prepare us to support the diversity in our institutions.

Professor Ulrich Kuhnen and Marieke van Egmond (2018) further explored these two ways of learning in *Learning: a cultural construct* including the goals of learning, the processes involved in learning, the effects it evokes and the role of teachers. You can see the main differences in the table below:

	Mind orientation*	Virtue Orientation
Goals of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To develop the mental skills needed to understand the world</li> <li>● To acquire knowledge that adheres to the laws of formal logic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A process of self-development on a social and moral level</li> <li>● To achieve mastery of the material and contribute to society</li> </ul>
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Based on exchange of ideas</li> <li>● Active participation in discussions</li> <li>● Questioning the known</li> <li>● Creativity is required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Concentration</li> <li>● Diligence and perseverance</li> <li>● Silent contemplation</li> </ul>
Affect evoked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning is enjoyable</li> <li>● If successful, be proud</li> <li>● Failure reduces learning motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning is effortful</li> <li>● If successful, be humble</li> <li>● Failure induces shame, but motivates</li> </ul>
Teachers' roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Knowledge facilitator</li> <li>● Can/should be challenged on content matters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Knowledge provider and moral model</li> <li>● Should be treated with respect</li> </ul>

*\*Adapted from Kühnen & van Egmond (2018)*

Looking at the differences between these two learning cultures, we can see how international students might experience learning challenges in New Zealand's education contexts. Both learners and teachers are challenged by these differences.

Some research shows how this impacts teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards students:

“Teachers enjoy students who interact, ask questions and perceive quiet

students as unresponsive, unappreciative, unenthusiastic.” (Hawthorne et al., 2004)

Avoiding these perceptions and attitudes towards minority students should be equally applied to international students. With the right blend of cultural awareness and targeted activities, virtue oriented learners are enabled to respond to a more western approach to learning.

From the students’ perspective, they can also be left confused and underperforming due to their lack of understanding of the rules of engagement in this new context. See some of the international students’ comments below.

*“I was quite shocked when I handed in my first assignment for my Masters degree and I was told my work looks like plagiarism and they expected me to share my opinion, not just repeat what authors have already said. I graduated at the top of my class in Argentina where teachers expect us to respect their knowledge and the contributions of key authors. In exams they expect us to be able to share exactly what those people had researched and no one wants to hear my personal view on this research.”* Maria from Argentina

*“I still struggle to concentrate in class as students are very loud and they are always challenging the teacher's knowledge, which I find very disrespectful. However, those students asking a lot of questions seem to get higher marks!”* - Jenny from Vietnam

Both students and teachers hold their own learning beliefs, perceptions and expectations around learning. These perspectives can be very different and can hinder the students’ experience in New Zealand. But there are some strategies we can apply to turn these differences into an opportunity. Let’s discuss what teachers can do about it.

### 3. What does this mean for teachers with international learners?

When facing a classroom with diversity in cultural dispositions and learning styles, what would be the best way to approach this and be effective? Your intercultural competence skills come in handy. Remember that intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from a different cultural background and that includes different learning beliefs. Being effective is about achieving your goal (in this case making sure everyone learns) and developing a practice that works for everyone.

To achieve this there are a few strategies you can use:

- *Set the scene upfront*

It is important that students are aware from day one of your expectations around their participation in class. What are the behaviours that will be rewarded, what are the interventions considered appropriate in this context, how will they be successful in your class, etc.

- *Cultivate your self awareness*

Make sure you understand YOUR preferred way of learning and what your expectations are around learning. How do these expectations influence the way you teach, assess and connect with your students?

- *Increase your awareness of your learners' cultures*

Take time to understand, as much as possible, how international students in your classroom prefer to learn. There are useful online tools such as [Cultural Atlas](#) and [Hofstede Insights](#) that highlight different cultural approaches to relating to an authority figure (e.g. a teacher). Ask what sort of methodology works best, how do they typically relate to the teachers, how do they feel when they fail, etc.

- *Diversify your methods*

The more you get to know your students, the more aware you will be of the diversity in front of you, so the use of a variety of methods will help you to develop a versatile 'dragnet' approach that appeals to all students.

- *Go from facilitator to teacher when necessary*

Remaining flexible and open to changes when something is not working is very important. Sometimes you will need to engage more as a facilitator (which works best for the mind orientation) and sometimes you will need to be more of an expert (which works best for the virtue orientation). Being explicit about when you are using each style will help students align with your expectations.

- *Use diversity as your 'magic power'*

When facilitating activities and conversations, tapping into your diversity will make your classes more relevant and also show students you care and appreciate diversity. Most topics lend themselves to another interpretation or perspective, so why not ask international students about their perspective? How is this taught in their countries? What are the stories they have heard about these topics?

- *Practise ako*

The *ako approach to learning* (NZ Teachers Council, 2011) is very helpful for international learners. A teacher who invests in a reciprocal learning approach is more likely to discover the unique funds of knowledge

international students bring to the classroom.

## 4. Fostering diversity and inclusion in the classroom - activities

There are plenty of activities that will help you use that diversity as your magic power, having meaningful conversations around difficult topics and helping students appreciate multiple perspectives.

You can find some great activities [in this page](#) developed thanks to *The Intercultural Learning For Pupils and Teachers* and *Expanding Learning Mobility Through Inclusion and Cooperation* projects.

Work on compiling resources that allow you to tap international students' funds of knowledge and increase their participation in class activities, zooms and tutorials.

[Understand the New Zealand's education system](#) in the ENZ Agents Lab offers insights into the uniqueness of the New Zealand education system. The online resource offers advice for agents advising new international students preparing for the likelihood of different approaches to learning and teaching.

### **UNESCO Story Circles**

A very powerful tool to increase awareness of diversity and a sense of inclusion and belonging in the classrooms is the [Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies: Story Circles](#).

Story Circles is a structured yet flexible methodology for developing intercultural competencies in a variety of contexts, both formal and informal. Piloted in five countries by UNESCO (Thailand, Costa Rica, Zimbabwe, Austria and Tunisia), the methodology has proven to be effective on a variety of different issues - from the social inclusion of migrants to dialogue among indigenous peoples - with participants acquiring strong skills for tolerance, empathy, critical thinking and listening for understanding.

### **Intercultural competence in TESOL**

Tapping into your student body diversity is a great way to develop curiosity, empathy and respect for differences and it is also a very effective way of supporting international students' language skills. From storytelling, to music and sports, there are plenty of opportunities to bring cultural diversity to your classroom.

Have a look at these articles from the British Council for strategies to encourage intercultural learning and exchange:

- [Story Telling](#)  
Activities that offer learners opportunities to share traditional folk tales

helps to authenticate their own heritage cultures and arouse the curiosity of their peers.

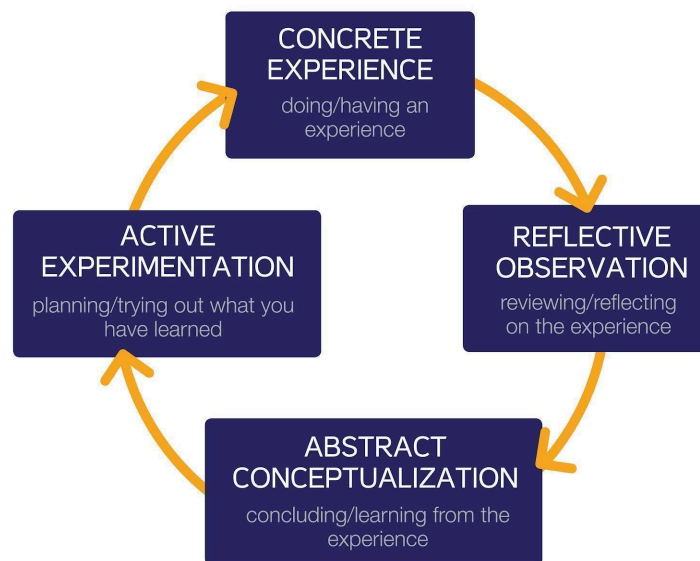
- [Intercultural Communicative Competence](#)

Teachers share their methods for raising cultural awareness which include investigating different countries' holidays, the introduction of foreign language films and songs with subtitles and preparing a day of celebrations that showcase different foods, poems and biographies of famous countrymen and countrywomen.

## 5. More on learning styles

In addition to the clear cultural influences in the expectations and beliefs around learning we discussed in terms of mind and virtue orientations, it can be useful to also explore David Kolb's learning styles.

Kolb (2018) introduced the experiential learning model to show learning as an ongoing process grounded in reflection that is continuously modified by new experiences. This model possesses relevance for international education because students do not simply learn by being transplanted into another culture. Their cross-border experience becomes beneficial when used as a basis for reflection and experimentation (you can learn more about this on the "[Enhance International Student experience](#)" topic).



(Kolb & Kolb, 2018)

The cycle of experiential learning begins when an individual engages in an activity (concrete experience), reflects on his or her experience (reflective observation), then derives meaning from the reflection (abstract conceptualisation), and finally, puts into action the newly gained

insight through a change in behaviour or attitude (active experimentation). While some people find it easier to start the learning process with a concrete experience, some others find that abstract conceptualisation is the way to go.

Think of the last time you learned a new recipe in the kitchen. You could have started mixing ingredients based on previous knowledge, maybe you tasted that dish before or saw someone else cooking it. This would be starting with a concrete experience. Or you could have found a book with the recipe to follow. This would be starting with the theory or abstract conceptualisation. Regardless of where you started, there will be reflection afterwards on whether the combination worked, or the ingredients were the right ones or if the amounts were the correct ones. Using that reflection you could then go on to try again (active experimentation) to improve that recipe or technique.



### QUICK TIP

*The social and academic environments that international learners encounter will be integral to their learning discovery. With effective early interventions, these learners will be more likely to actively experiment in close connection to local students, which will have strong positive outcomes for their inclusion and integration.*

According to the experiential learning model people learn best when actively engaged in a reflective process based on a particular life experience. Educators are familiar with the phrase reflection-on-practice. Although much of experiential learning can occur naturally in daily life, it can also be intentionally structured to guide learners through an experience and maximise learning outcomes.

#### A. Encouraging learner reflection

If we consider international students living in a new culture, they are accumulating new concrete experiences, but that alone does not guarantee learning. Teachers can champion reflection through a variety of activities (like the ones shared above) or simply asking focused questions such as:

- What are the main differences and similarities you have noticed?
- What works and does not work for you in this context?
- What have you observed regarding teacher-student relationships in

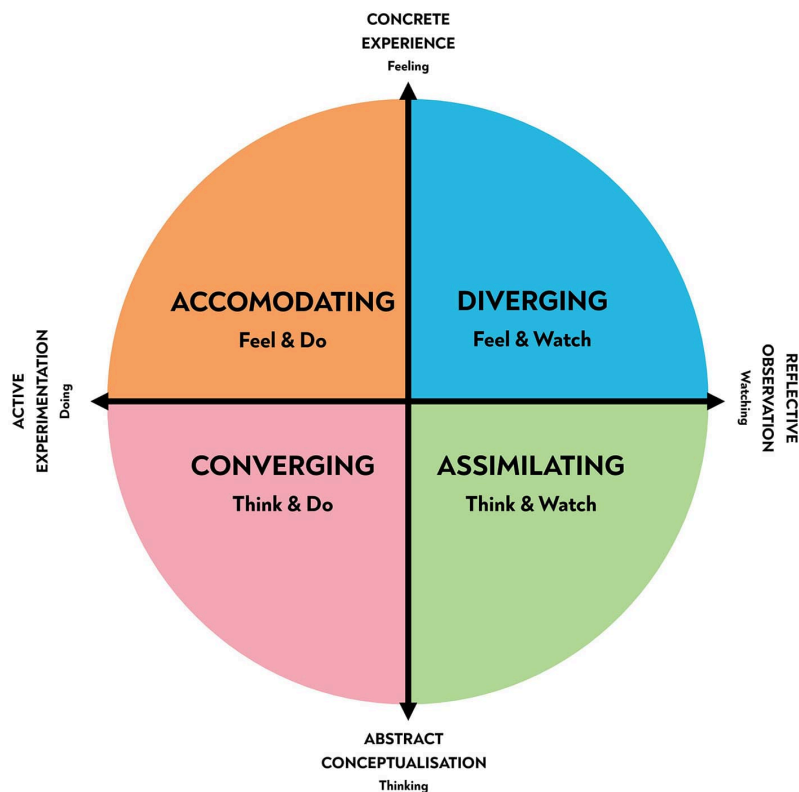
- the classrooms here and back home?
- What does that tell you about the values?

After this reflection we can invite students to try new ways of interacting or behaving that they have identified might work best in this context. Then the reflective cycle embeds deeper processing and learning.

Students' cultural backgrounds and prior experience of education systems will influence their level of comfort with the different parts of the cycle. Students from virtue orientation cultures will be more used to front-of-class teaching and lectures (abstract conceptualisation), while others raised in mind orientation cultures will value reflection and active experimentation.

The experiential learning model (Kolb, 2018) retains currency among intercultural competency educators, workshop facilitators and community educators. It has been useful for supporting international students one-to-one and designing tailored orientations that cater to different learning styles.

The model also distinguishes between learners' preference for acquiring information (through concrete experience or abstract conceptualisation) or processing information (through reflective observation or active experimentation). Learners have specific preferred learning styles informed by prior experiences. See the model below:



Adapted from Kolb, D.A. (2018). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. Second Edition. Pearson Education."

### **Diverging**

These learners usually have the ability to see things from differing perspectives and prefer watching to doing. They are also able to use their imaginations to be creative in their overall learning styles. They usually enjoy icebreakers, brainstorming and storytelling.

### **Assimilating**

These people are able to explore and analyse models well. They are more interested in concepts and tasks than in interpersonal relationships. The type of activities they enjoy the most are lectures, discussion of patterns and theories and instructional videos.

### **Converging**

These people are good problem-solvers and are seen as being quite practical in their analyses of ideas and tasks. They are more likely to enjoy role plays, simulations, case studies and scenarios discussions.

### **Accommodating**

These people tend to be more practical in their outlook of learning, and they like to see problems from an intuitive point of view. They are the type of people that rely on gut feeling. They like new-found challenges. This type of learner will enjoy hands-on activities, goal setting, action planning and field trips (Kolb, 2018)

## **B. International learners are individually unique**

These individual characteristics offer another caution against over-emphasising cultural differences. At the person-to-person level, each learner is a 'finite mystery' (Yancey, 2001) . Also, certain education systems may favour certain learning styles over others. For some individual learners it is not until they arrive in New Zealand that they have an opportunity to experiment with a more intuitive learning style; learning in a New Zealand context might prove to be a liberating step-change for them. What is considered a more informal, interpersonal approach to education in Aotearoa, New Zealand is a pull-factor for some international students and their families.

To consider the learning and teaching implications for international learners see Learning style characteristics in this [document](#).

Finally, teachers are encouraged to be keen observers and guard against auto-pilot routines in diverse classrooms. The distinguished teacher ed documentator Professor John Fanselow (1987) counsels teachers to do their own experimentation by *doing the opposite* in their teaching practice. He encourages teachers to intermittently break their own pedagogic rules and see what happens. This is essentially an encouragement to continually critique preconceptions of learning and teaching to see whether they bring positive, demonstrable impacts on learner behaviour. Fanselow's counsel is particularly useful for teachers working with international students as the assumptions teachers bring about learning may be truer of their domestic students than they are for their international learners.

## 6. Conclusion

International learners bring a wealth of diversity to classrooms all around the world. This diversity can present challenges for teachers, international education professionals and the students themselves. International students' cultural instincts influence the way they see the world, the way they communicate, and their values and beliefs in general. This includes expectations around learning and teaching. We learned that some cultures possess a mind orientation where the focus is on critical thinking, creativity and relating to the teacher as a facilitator. Other cultures prefer a virtue orientation to learning which focuses on hard work, humility and a view of the teacher as a respected knowledge provider.

An awareness of different educational orientations will help the teacher to tailor their pedagogy for diverse classrooms that increasingly include New Zealand born-students, new settlers, refugee-background learners and international students. It is important for teachers to be developing their intercultural competence as a matter of ongoing professional development. This allows them to get to grips with their own personal beliefs and simultaneously improve their understanding of the learning needs in front of them.

Teachers are required to be flexible to tap into students' diversity in a way that works for everyone and helps students develop curiosity, empathy and appreciate differences. Including activities that celebrate diversity and foster inclusion in the classroom are effective ways of doing so beyond your curriculum.

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