

Fostering Inclusion in a Diverse Classroom

Written by Jan Lüdert and Katriona Stewart

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JAN LÜDERT AND KATRIONA STEWART, OCT 30 2017

High school can be daunting, especially when young students have to make decisions that will shape their careers and lives. Many opt for higher education because it is the 'thing to do,' without fully knowing what university, or their chosen discipline, actually entails. The impetus behind the University of British Columbia's Future Global Leaders (FGL) pre-university series is to prepare high school learners for the future by giving them a taste of college life. In this two-week intensive program, students from around the world come together to live on campus, take part in a variety of social and cultural activities, and complete an introductory course taught by UBC instructors. Students get to delve into a variety of subjects including clinical neuroscience, virtual reality, and processes of globalization. The courses are designed to introduce students to the critical skills required for success in a university environment, and to promote cultural understanding and leadership in our interdependent world.

Our course, "Politics, Economics and Diplomacy in a Global Context," examines key global economic and political challenges facing the world today, including financial crises, the Syrian Refugee Crisis, global trade debates, nuclear proliferation, and global health governance.

Last summer our course reached capacity, attracting 33 students aged 15-18 from around the globe, with backgrounds spanning Canada, China, Colombia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Japan, Singapore, Mexico, Germany and New Zealand. The diversity of perspectives inspired rich class discussions: a group from Beijing shared what it is like to live in a heavily polluted city, a student from Latin America expressed his dissatisfaction with IMF structural adjustment policies, and a shy contingent from Japan voiced their fears of Western neglect in the face of North Korea's growing nuclear weapons program.

FGL takes pride in providing an holistic educational experience that goes beyond the classroom: students come together from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, and many make lifelong friendships. Our cohort repeatedly emphasized how much they valued the program's emphasis on intercultural connection: several expressed a curiosity in learning about other cultures, and a highlight for many was working in culturally mixed teams. Our students were visibly supportive of one another, and formed bonds within a short time, eagerly relaying the experiences they shared together outside the classroom, such as kayaking around Bowen Island.

The harmonious learning environment was no fortunate accident, but the result of careful design. Classroom dynamics will, to a certain extent, depend on individual student personalities. However, a lot can be done to balance conflicting values and expectations. Most importantly, the instructor(s) must seek to create an inclusive atmosphere that encourages curiosity and interaction.

At first, our main emphasis was on building a rapport between instructors and students. Creating a comfortable environment was especially important in our case, as for the majority this was a foreign classroom environment. We employed several techniques to help put the students at ease, including greeting them in their native tongues, creating a safe, respectful space through the development of student-initiated group guidelines, and by pre-selecting groups to balance genders and nationalities. Each day we would assign groups case study activities to work on, while also creating opportunities for paired activity and inter-group interaction.

We typically began each class with an 'icebreaker' to help students bond and motivate them to engage with key

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themes. These included conventional get-to-know-you games, such as introducing one another to the class, but also activities that allowed students to express their unique viewpoints on a given topic. An example of this was the “Value Line,” a learning activity where students stand at a chosen point along an imaginary spectrum to demonstrate their stance on an issue. Once in position, the instructor asks additional questions to encourage reasoning and reflection. By probing student perspectives, the instructor can then adjust the class material to align with student knowledge and interests.

To help forge further connection, we also chose activities that welcomed personal disclosure: “A Star and a Wish” is an interactive and reflective activity that allows students to discover commonalities, inspiring kinship and trust. Participants discreetly write down a few “stars” – things they are enjoying about the program or are going well, and a couple of “wishes” – things that they would like to change or think could be improved. The students turn their paper into a dart, fly it across the classroom, and then pick up someone else’s piece of paper (to ensure anonymity) and share it back.

This activity showed students that they are not alone – others too were feeling shy and overwhelmed, or were grappling with learning in a foreign language. For the instructors, it also served as a useful pre-evaluation tool: we analyzed these insights and then adjusted the course design accordingly. For instance, we hand-selected introverted students to lead the final group presentations to encourage them practice presentation and communication skills, and we also observed students on an individual basis so to effectively and equitably facilitate the group process.

One of our most effective tools for increasing engagement was establishing a flat hierarchy. We created a relatively informal environment – we made jokes, let students call us by our first names, and gave them an active role in decision-making. Research shows that the key to an engaged classroom is putting students in charge of their learning. In line with evidence-based practice we staged a dot-mocracy to offer students an opportunity to determine some class content. We listed case study topics on the board and asked students to choose those most appealing. The top five cases became the focus for the course.

Teaching students from a range of nationalities and cultures results can be rich and rewarding, yet it is not without difficulties. Common challenges include avoiding exclusion and managing differing expectations. We employed several techniques to foster inclusion and collaboration, including starting class with icebreaker games, and directing and framing group work to maximize student-to-student interaction. Lastly, we cultivated intellectual engagement by giving students an active voice over their learning, while adjusting our pedagogy throughout.

(This post is number one of three related pieces on [Innovating a Mixed-Mode Course in a Multicultural Classroom](#). Click here for installment number two.)

About the author:

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Katriona Stewart received her MA in Political Science from the University of British Columbia, and has a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws from Otago University, New Zealand. She is passionate about innovative and progressive pedagogical practices, and currently works in educational program management at UBC Extended Learning.

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