Good Practice Principles in Practice:
Teaching Across Cultures

October 2013

Good Practice Principles: Teaching across Cultures

The Good Practice Principles Teaching Across Cultures have been developed to guide and inform practice. They are designed to help program leaders and teachers to design, implement and evaluate curricula and teaching practices. Those who provide learning support services may also find the guides useful in the evaluation of their contributions to effective teaching and learning across cultures.

The Principles in Brief

Good teaching across cultures will:

1: Focus on students as learners

2: Respect and adjust for diversity

3: Provide context-specific information and support

4: Facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

6: Prepare students for life in a globalised world

These principles are informed by research reported in the Good Practice Report: Learning and Teaching across Cultures http://www.olt.gov.au/resources?text=learning+and+teaching+across+cultures . They are explained in more detail below.

The Quick Guides

A suite of Quick Guides to good practice in teaching across cultures has been created using the six principles. You can find guides on curriculum design, teaching, assessment, supporting English language development, group work, working with learning and language support professionals and professional development for teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse learners ieaa.org.au/ltac.

Quick Guides are available on the following topics:

• Assessment

• Curriculum Design

• Developing English Language Skills

• Managing Group Work

• Professional Development

• Student Services

• Teaching

The Quick Guides can be found at the following web address: ieaa.org.au/ltac

The Principles Explained

Following Nicol (2007) the Good Practice Principles seek to:

- capture core ideas from the published research

- be specific enough to guide teachers in their practice

- be flexible enough to accommodate the variety of different learning and teaching contexts within which teachers and learners work, for example: offshore, onshore, online, in large and small groups.

The Good Practice Principles and the Quick Guides do not provide a prescriptive or complete list of best practice. They have been written to assist teachers and those who work with them to check their current practice and consider what they might do to make improvements appropriate to their particular context. This approach is consistent with Yorke (2012) who writes, '… teaching is not a simple matter that can be expressed in a set of rules applicable to all circumstances. Rather, it has to be approached in terms of a set of principles to be applied in a manner appropriate to circumstances' (p. v).

Four basic premises underly the principles

1. Teaching practices and learning behaviours are effective if they are fit for their purpose.

Purposes for teaching and for learning vary. Teaching practices and learning behaviours are most effective when they are fit for their purpose. For example, in circumstances where a repetitive and memory-based approach is required, teaching practices that encourage repetition and recall will be effective. In other circumstances, where application and developing a personal stance in relation to a topic are required, a more effective approach would be to encourage discussion and debate. If the intention is to develop critical thinking skills and the teaching encourages and rewards rote learning, the teaching practices are not likely to be effective. They will not encourage fit-for-purpose learning behaviours. In order to be fit-for-purpose effective teaching across cultures also recognises that students bring different skills and experiences of learning and of teaching. Individual students will be stronger in some areas than others.

2. Teaching encompasses a broad range of activities.

Teachers select content, plan classroom learning activities, design assessment tasks and provide feedback on student performance. Principles for effective teaching across cultures need to be equally broad ranging and allow for variation in implementation, depending on the nature of the discipline and its related professions, the teaching and learning context and the characteristics of the student group.

3. Teachers have access to specialised support for being effective intercultural teachers.

Teaching across cultures can be challenging and responsibility for doing so effectively rests primarily with individual teachers but never with them alone. Institutions have a responsibility to provide teachers with access to specialised support; program teams need to collaborate and design programs where developing students' skills and knowledge of intercultural learning are shared. Teachers have a responsibility to access ideas, advice and expertise and to use them effectively to improve student learning.

4. Cultures are dynamic and variable.

There are many ways of defining culture. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. Cultures are most often recognised by shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings. These are learned through a process of socialization. However, within different cultural groups, individuals are unique. Meaning is continuously constructed through human interaction and communication within and across cultural groups. Cultural learning is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process for students and teachers. Cultural diversity in the student population has a significant impact on teaching and learning.

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The Principles Explained

Principle 1: Focus on students as learners

Students who enter tertiary education have been learning for years, within differently organised systems and using a range of teaching and learning methods. No learning environment is value-free and moving between systems with different expectations and assumptions will almost inevitably result in intercultural incompatibility. All students, not just some students, need to adjust to the disciplinary and academic cultures of their universities. It is important to make expectations of learners clear and transparent. Even with help, transition can be difficult and may take some students longer than others.

Effective intercultural teaching assumes everyone benefits from expanding their repertoire of learning behaviours. Some students will prefer to absorb information by listening carefully, taking notes and reviewing lecture content online. Others will prefer to ask questions, challenge the 'facts' that are presented and engage you and other students in argument and debate. Transition into a new academic culture will usually require students to acquire different skills and adopt locally valued behaviours in order to be effective learners.

In line with this principle you can teach effectively across cultures by, for example:
• providing prompt feedback to students on their performance, including their use of language for academic and professional purposes
• not making assumptions about students' learning preferences based on their cultural background or their appearance
• providing a variety of learning and assessment activities
• providing examples, models and suggestions of ways of approaching learning in the discipline
• facilitating the development of self-assessment and reflection on learning
• embedding the development of academic and information literacy skills into your course
• supporting the development of communities of learners through, for example, peer mentoring and peer assisted study programs.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Principle 2: Respect and adjust for diversity

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Terms such as 'international students', 'domestic students' and 'indigenous students' are frequently used, and with good reason, but they can mask the diversity within these groups. Indigenous, international and domestic students differ markedly, for example in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status and age as well as in their prior experience of education, work and life. There are also variations in English language capability within each group. Diversity can be a resource that enriches all students' learning if teachers are able to create an inclusive learning environment.

Teaching and learning within a culturally inclusive learning environment requires effort from teachers and students. For teachers, the aim is to create a learning culture that exposes all students to multiple perspectives, challenges them and connects with them with alternative views of the world. Inclusive teaching treats different ways of knowing as a valuable resource for learning.

Students are unlikely to respect and value their diverse peers' knowledge unless encouraged to do so. Respecting and adjusting for diversity requires judgement and reflective practice on the part of the teacher and reflection on the effectiveness of any attempt to create a more inclusive teaching environment for all students.

You can teach effectively across cultures, adjusting for diversity, by, for example:

- finding out about incoming students' linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Student groups will differ, one from another and individuals will differ within those groups

- recognising diversity in the cultural, socio-cultural, academic and linguistic backgrounds of the local student population

- adjusting teaching, learning and assessment activities to take into account and utilise your students' diverse cultural, socio-cultural, academic and linguistic backgrounds, work and life experiences

- asking students about their preferred modes of learning and encouraging them to try new approaches to learning

- maintaining a sharp eye on equivalence, fairness, inclusivity through reflective practice informed by student performance data

- building on and using your students' cultural and social capital, and individual differences

- seeking out examples, suggestions and guidance on effective ways in which others have made adjustments to cater for student diversity.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Principle 3: Provide context-specific information and support

The context in which learning takes place includes the surroundings (such as the university campus and its location), the setting (for example large lecture theatre, laboratory, small classroom) and the circumstances (for example a 'test' under supervision, an online discussion group in a first year class). People will bring different expectations and attribute different meanings to their surroundings, settings and circumstances. The context will shape their own behaviour and how they expect others to behave but most remain unaware of what they expect or assume in a familiar setting or situation. It is easy to assume that others understand context in the same way that we do.

Teaching and learning is an interaction where individual teachers and students may have very different expectations of each other. Context-specific information and support makes expectations transparent. Clarity is especially important in relation to assessment expectations including the criteria by which success will be measured. A second aspect requiring explicit context-specific information is tertiary academic skills, such as academic writing, information literacy, numeracy and computer literacy. Each academic skill is defined and expressed within a specific disciplinary context and all students will benefit from being taught, for example, particular disciplinary requirements in relation to critical thinking, using sources appropriately and identifying and reviewing relevant literature.

You can teach effectively across cultures, adjusting information for context, by, for example:

- recognising the need to adjust teaching and service provision for learning context and student cohort

- conducting a needs analysis at the beginning of a course and using findings to shape provision

- referring students where necessary to specialist services, preferably tailored to the needs of your course/subject

- seeking advice and assistance from support services staff with specialised knowledge on embedding the development of academic literacies into course and assessment design

- encouraging students in lectures and tutorials and/or online to ask questions about expectations in relation to assessment criteria (including the weighting of components such as grammar, vocabulary, content and structure)

- explaining what different task requirements mean ('evaluate', 'justify', 'analyse') and creating opportunities for students to use and critique exemplars of efforts to meet task requirements

- clarifying what good performance is by providing marking rubrics which explain each criterion; clarifying expected standards or performance for specific assessment tasks

- waiting after asking a question to give less confident English speakers time to formulate an answer.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Principle 4: Enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

Creating environments conducive to interaction is an important foundation for meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement. Recent research highlights the importance of teacher intervention focussed on enabling meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement such as:

- creating opportunities for all students to learn and "practise" intercultural communication skills

- embedding the development of English language skills in the curriculum as English language competency plays an important part in students feeling confident in social interactions

- planning and managing formal group work within courses so that it enhances understanding and appreciation of other cultures, preparing students for their future lives where international and intercultural awareness and skills will undoubtedly be required

- planning and managing formal group work across programs so that early experiences of intercultural learning which are not sufficient on their own, are followed up at different stages of the program and skills are consolidated.

The informal or co-curriculum can also encourage and reward meaningful intercultural engagement. It is a core university responsibility to actively foster a diverse cultural environment and to create opportunities for cultural learning beyond the classroom. Creating opportunities for domestic and international students to interact outside of the classroom is particularly useful.

You can teach effectively across cultures and enable dialogue and engagement by, for example:

- designing cross-cultural tasks which use and link with students' knowledge and experience

- providing specific preparation and support for all students to develop their cross-cultural communication skills prior to and during group tasks

- ensuring appropriate support is available to develop all students' academic and social language skills

- assessing the development of intercultural skills and individual students' participation in intercultural group work at regular intervals

- talking to other staff teaching on the program about how they enable and encourage intercultural engagement

- involving specialists in teaching intercultural communication skills in the preparation of all students for cross-cultural group work

- assessing the process as well as the outcome of cross-cultural group assignments

- encouraging self reflection and self assessment by students as they engage in cross-cultural group assignments.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Principle 5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

Good teaching requires the ability to adapt methods and approaches, including those for assessment, to different contexts and student groups. Tasks that have worked well in one culturally diverse setting may not work well in another. Culturally inclusive teaching requires a certain amount of flexibility in planning and delivery and it assumes teachers respond to evidence showing a need for change.

Teachers who wish to check their effectiveness in working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds can consult evaluation data (routinely collected or as a one off for a particular issue) and can access the extensive literature available. Analysis of data by cultural group can provide insights. For example, it may show if students are unfairly disadvantaged because of their cultural background. This is especially important in relation to assessment.

Supplementing student evaluation with other data such as peer observation, feedback from specialists in teaching across cultures and one's own reflections can suggest adaptations to language, style and methods of delivery. Other aspects for review include assessment tasks and ways to use diversity as a resource.

You can teach effectively across cultures, remaining flexible and adaptable, by, for example:

- designing assignments that allow all students, regardless of their cultural background, to draw on their life experiences as they learn

- seeking regular feedback from colleagues on your effectiveness in upholding each of these Good Practice Principles: Teaching Across Cultures

- engaging with literature on teaching and learning across cultures

- experimenting with a variety of different approaches to teaching and monitoring their effectiveness with different groups of learners

- collecting evidence and advice on your effectiveness as a teacher of diverse cultural groups from a variety of sources

- seeking out colleagues from diverse backgrounds and discussing approaches to teaching with them

- getting feedback from transnational partner staff on course content and assessment task design, in particular on whether you have inadvertently unfairly disadvantaged students from cultural backgrounds different from your own.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Principle 6: Prepare students for life in a globalised world

Globalisation is an ongoing process. It has created a world that is both more connected and more divided, in which power and resources are not shared equally. Ethical action and social responsibility underpinned by understanding of and respect for other ways of knowing and ways of being are increasingly important. As graduates, today's students will take on roles as citizens and professionals in this interconnected world. Many will become leaders in their field.

Most universities have statements of graduate qualities or attributes related to global citizenship which connect with other graduate attribute statements. Using these to inform course and program design and review focusses attention on the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes to thrive in the globalised world of the future.

If the curriculum is essentially ethnocentric in focus it is unlikely to challenge stereotypes, contribute to greater equality, enhance understanding and appreciation of other cultures and prepare students for the international, intercultural and global context of their future lives.

You can teach effectively across cultures and prepare students for life in a globalised world by, for example:

- critiquing the implicit assumptions of disciplinary perspectives and ways of knowing and encouraging your students to do the same

- developing your students' understanding of the requirements of professional practice and citizenship in a globalised world

- engaging with global problems and global issues and encouraging your students to critique these issues (including in assessment tasks)

- discussing the progressive development of the skills, knowledge and attitudes required of global citizens and professionals across the program informally with colleagues and as part of formal periodic course and program reviews

- making a commitment to the development of your own and your students' intercultural communication skills.

More examples of this principle in practice are provided in each Quick Guide.

Useful references

The following sources have informed the formulation of these principles, individually and holistically. Many contain detailed examples of these principles in practice in different cultures.

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