

Resource Guide

Fostering Cross-Cultural Relationships with International Students

International students can struggle to feel welcomed and accepted in the classroom. They may not feel capable of contributing to class discussions due to linguistic demands. Their ability to relate to course content may be impacted by different lived experiences. Above all, they may not know how to build and maintain social connections with their [new](#) peers and instructors. Establishing rapport and learning more about your international students' backgrounds are key for fostering culturally diverse and responsive learning environments that provide opportunities for cross-cultural relationships (Glass and Westmont, 2014). The following are pedagogical strategies for doing so in the classroom:

- **Incorporate culturally-responsive icebreakers.** Icebreaker activities, often defined as techniques to introduce people to each other, are frequently used during the first week of class to allow instructors and students to get to know one another (Conrad and Donaldson, 2011). Consider how these activities are framed. Instead of going around the room and asking students their name and what high school they attended, have students introduce themselves in small groups and identify things they, as a group, have in common. Or, have students disclose information about their personal and course interests in a shared Google doc, online discussion, or live (possibly anonymous) in-class poll. This way, international students don't feel excluded by having to provide alternative narratives.
- **Honor your students' names.** When we mispronounce or use incorrect names, this creates barriers to learning for students from non-Anglo, international, first-generation, Chicano, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Gonzalez (2014) notes that persistent name mispronunciation is a form of a microaggression, whether that mispronunciation is intentional or not. Correctly pronouncing and using preferred student names honors their heritage and indicates you care about them as individual learners. You can begin this process by asking students to pronounce their name in a pre-course survey, video and/or audio introduction submitted in Canvas, or online discussion. Check-in with students periodically to make sure you are pronouncing their names correctly and use these names when providing graded feedback or facilitating class discussions.
- **Provide opportunities for informal interactions.** Weekly Zoom coffee talks, class review sessions, and online discussions can help students build social connections in a low-stakes environment. Scheduling student introductions in-person or through Zoom at the beginning of the semester can allow you to get to know more about your students. Reiterating that office hours are a time students can use to ask questions, receive feedback, or talk with you about their learning can provide incentives for

students to reach out later for help or feedback, reducing the impact of cultural barriers or linguistic differences.

Resources

Conrad, Rita-Marie. and J. Ana Donaldson. "Characteristics of an Effective Icebreaker." Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction. Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Glass, C.R. & Westmont, C.M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. International Journal of Intercultural Relations 38: 106-119.

Gonzales, J. (2014). "How we pronounce student names and why it matters" (podcast). Cult of Pedagogy.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email or submit a consultation request form.