Building Community in Culturally Diverse Classrooms at University

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Abstract: Internationalization strategies at Canadian universities have increased the recruitment and enrolment of international students diversifying the demographic of today's classrooms. A change in classroom demographics entails a broader spectrum of students are learning together, which raises questions about the potential barriers international students face and how an instructor can use inclusive methods that value the experiences of all students. Integral to students' success is building positive emotional connections with the people, feeling safe and confident to engage fully in their academic and personal lives through feelings of belonging (Halse, 2018; Tran, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Instructors play a key role in establishing a sense of belonging by fostering classroom-based communities. This paper conceptualizes how university instructors can (a) create equitable learning environments that are responsive to students' lived experiences, (b) reflect cultural relativism, and (c) cognizant of using inclusive teaching and learning methods.

Keywords: internationalization, inclusive teaching methods, culturally diverse classrooms, university, post-secondary

Introduction

Sitting at the airport in Beijing, student Jiali is waiting for her flight with feelings of both nervousness and excitement about her journey to Canada for university. This is her first time travelling outside of China and her first time away from her family. Last month Jiali participated in an online call with Student Assistant Leah from the university's International Student Office. Leah gave Jiali advice about course registration and answered her many questions about campus and the city. Jiali told Leah that she was excited about seeing snow for the first time, visiting campus, and taking courses, but she also expressed nervousness about being away from her family and living outside of China. Jiali knew that everything would be new and worried about fitting in. After Leah reassured Jiali that things would be okay, they said goodbye with Leah saying, "See you on campus!". Jiali felt comforted by Leah's kind words and knowing that Leah would be on campus if she has questions or needs help. After Jiali's long flight to Canada, she arrived at her destination and called a taxi to take her to the university residence. The driver asked Jiali about starting university, and Jiali said with a big smile, "I am excited because I have a friend there!"

Jiali's story represents students' experiences at an Atlantic Canadian university participating in an initiative that connected incoming international students with current students. The story is to illustrate the strength that feeling welcome and having connections with others can have in creating a sense of belonging for international students starting a new life at university abroad. The personal connection Jiali made with Leah enabled Jiali to ask questions and express her ideas, with the information and reassurance received, increasing Jiali's self-confidence. In 2020, over 500,000 international students enrolled at Canadian post-secondary institutions (Canadian Bureau of International Education [CBIE], 2020). Like Jiali, many international students in 2020 left home for the first time and travelled to a place that was new and unknown, hoping to fit in and prosper as university students. An increase to international enrolment at Canadian universities over the past several years has diversified university campuses and classrooms with students from different home countries coming together in the same learning environment. Integral to students' success is building positive emotional connections with people, feeling safe, and having confidence to engage fully in their academic and personal lives, creating a sense of belonging to the people and places within their surroundings (Halse, 2018; Tran, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Fostering a sense of belonging at university is a step toward creating an inclusive learning environment.

At university, a sense of belonging among students can be influenced by such things as language, communication style, and subject-specific knowledge, which establishes boundaries of who is included or excluded in academic and non-academic activities (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006). With classes becoming more diversified, questions about belonging and inclusion are important to ask. What can be done to help international students like Jiali integrate into campus life and develop a sense of belonging? Will Jiali feel that her voice and previous experiences are represented in the courses she takes? Equally important are the perceptions of domestic students in classes with Jiali. Do domestic students feel a connection with international students? Then there are perceptions of instructors about their approach to teaching and the integration of international students in their courses. What epistemologies are emphasized in courses, and are instructors aware of the signifiers of belonging? An intricate balance of recognizing and representing the multiple epistemological and ontological realities ensues among students and instructors when they come together in one learning environment. University classrooms can provide opportunities for students and instructors to create a

social discourse in which their experiences and opinions are shared and valued. Within a culturally diverse classroom, this has the potential to broaden students' empathy and understanding of differing worldviews creating more inclusive minded individuals.

In this paper, the author integrates educational theory with her experiences teaching and leading programs for international students to conceptualize how instructors can foster a sense of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms. Figure 1 has been created to visually illustrate the intersection of three overarching areas of instructor agency: (1) being *responsive* to students' lived experiences and the encouragement of authentic student interactions that establish shared meaning and academic growth; (2) building cultural *relativism* through a self-reflexive analysis of the influential factors of positionality and intercultural sensitivity; and, (3) *recognition* of what internationalization entails and how the current structure can be reorganized to create windows instead of walls. Throughout the paper, these areas are discussed in relation to one another and within the dynamic of teaching and learning methods, with Jiali's story woven into the argument. Joining these three tenets begins by investigating what a community with a sense of belonging could look like in a learning environment.
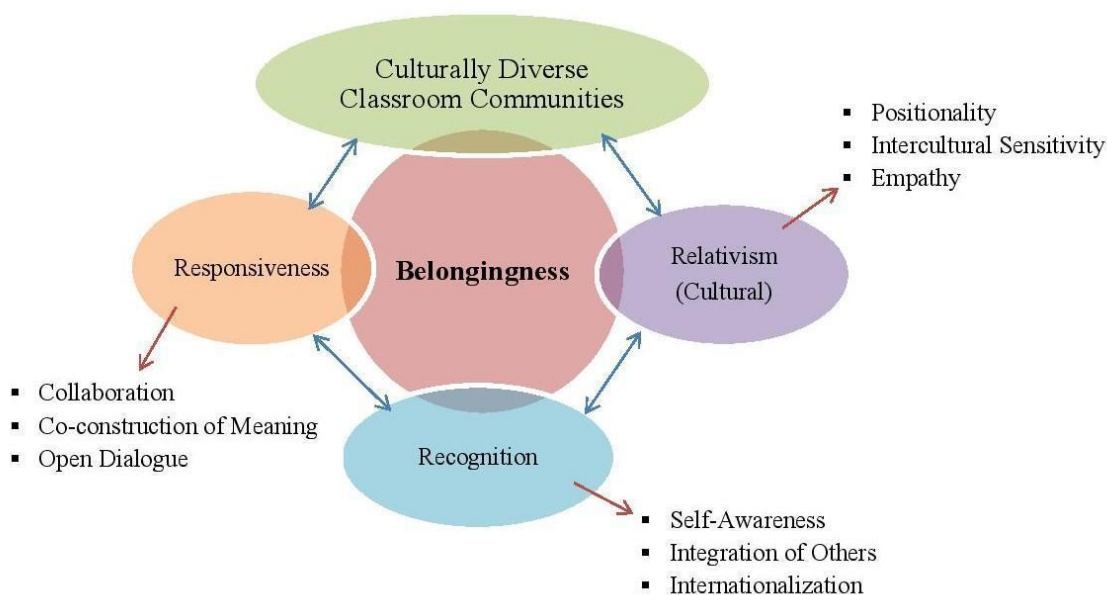
Figure 1: A Community Model for Culturally Diverse Classrooms

Building Community Through Responsiveness

Dewey (2016) described a community as members who have shared beliefs, aims, aspirations and knowledge, with a participatory component among members to build an understanding of one another's perspective. A community is not built by people living in physical proximity with one another, having common goals, or through cooperation. A key element to a group becoming a community is an authentic awareness of the group's shared goals, with a recognition and ability to change individual behaviors to enable the group to reach these goals (Dewey, 2016). Culturally diverse classrooms in Canadian higher education can include the characteristics of community within the dynamic of a class by members who co-construct understanding of course content and discourse through open dialogue among students. A co-construction of knowledge places recognition and value of individual and collective voices, enhancing social individualism, fostering intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intellectual growth (Feinburg, 2014). Building a classroom-based community entails the instructor is being responsive by creating opportunities for students to make connections with one another, which enhances authentic interest to learn *from* and *with* each other as a connected group (Dewey, 2016). Furthermore, a classroom-based community can be nurtured by building a shared understanding of course content using a variety of teaching methods that encourages collaboration. Learning together has the potential to increase student satisfaction and academic performance, while also empowering students to support each other and have a voice (McKinney et al., 2006). Peer connections build self-awareness and awareness of others, shifting attitudes and promoting growth at both the individual and collective level. Collective awareness reinforces a commitment to

achieving group goals, satisfaction, cooperation, and motivation to learn (Dewey, 2016; Feinburg, 2014; Rovai, 2002). Another positive outcome of authentic awareness is empathy and appreciation of the value each person brings to the overall purpose and action of the classroom community rather than requiring conformity to the dominant ideologies represented by only a few group members.

Let's return to international student Jiali and her classroom-based experience as a first-year student studying Economics at a Canadian university. It is October, Jiali is six weeks into the semester and taking five courses. Her classes range in size from thirty to one hundred and thirty students. In the first few weeks of a mid-size economics class, Jiali did not know if she was doing things the 'right way'. She diligently took notes of everything the instructor wrote on the board, but when the instructor posed questions to the class, Jiali was uncomfortable answering them aloud even though she had ideas. When Jiali noticed a few of her classmates were in two of the same classes as her, she arrived early for class and chose a seat next to familiar classmates helping her feel more comfortable. Sometimes Jiali whispered comments to the classmate beside her, and at the encouragement of this person, Jiali started to add comments to class discussions. Jiali's confidence grew as she noticed her classmates and instructor respond positively to what she had to say. This motivated Jiali to continue participating in class discussion, and as she shared more of her experiences, Jiali realized that her classmates were interested in hearing about the economic structures in China because it provided new insight into course topics. As the semester progressed, Jiali began to feel as a valued member of the economics classes she attended. Jiali's story represents how classroom-based communities can be built through small steps that encourage students to share their personal opinions and experiences. A responsive instructor encourages students to share their ideas, which can diversify perspectives adding breadth and depth to course-based concepts.

Establishing a community-based classroom that recognizes and values different perspectives creates the condition for growth individually and collectively but is dependent on members' openness. There is the inherent risk that social cohesion created through shared commonalities becomes entrenched in inequality by members who have a belief in there being a particular way of doing things (Halse, 2018). If there is belief in one dominant ideology, new members would only be accepted into the classroom community if they share these beliefs. In a culturally diverse classroom, the boundaries outlining inclusion become apparent when students holding different opinions are required to assimilate with the opinions of the majority. Difference is no longer valued, thus establishing the notion that students need to let go of their otherness to be accepted. If Jiali's classmates had not responded positively to Jiali's opinions, she may not have offered her opinion to the class discussion. Encouraging students to share ideas in small groups and with the whole class is one strategy an instructor can use to build a sense of community. Not having Jiali's voice included would have lessened the opportunity for Jiali's classmates to hear stories about Chinese society. Including the voices of students who are outside of the dominant group is an important component of creating an inclusive classroom-based community. Responsiveness to and recognition of the values and perspectives of individual students is a step toward creating a sense of belonging to the group.

The Centrality of Belongingness to Community

Belongingness is a central component to building a classroom-based community. Belonging entails connectedness, safety, and emotional attachments resonate in group membership (Rovai, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Also, belonging is social cohesion co-constructed by group members' interactions with one another, things, or the institutions in their environment, with the socio-cultural context an intersection of self and social (Halse, 2018). However, the importance of belonging is not fully realized unless a person's sense of belonging becomes jeopardized or threatened through politicized structures that determine membership (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Within the community of a classroom, a student's sense of belonging could be threatened when there are outward-facing differences such as physical attributes, language spoken, and different interaction patterns, which makes it easy for a student to feel like an outsider.

In a culturally diverse class, students who perceive themselves as outsiders struggle to find a place within the social discourse of the group. The quotation below is from a study that looked at international students' experiences at university (Freeman & Li, 2019). It describes how a new international student can feel about their experience studying at a university abroad with English speaking students when they do not have a sense of belonging, "I'm just afraid. I'm afraid they [domestic students] cannot understand what I am talking about. I'm also afraid I cannot understand what they are talking about. And I'm afraid they don't like other people to ask them anything. It's like we have nothing in common." Chinese student (Freeman & Li, 2019, p. 30). This quotation illustrates the primary tenets

of what constitutes belongingness: (1) social location, (2) identification & emotional attachment, and (3) ethical and political value systems (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These three elements are interconnected components of the process of the *who*, *when, where, what,* and *why* of belonging. Who are you at a given time and place? What is your role within the group? Why are you a member? In the above quotation, the student expresses feelings of being afraid which transfers into feelings of not fitting in. Within this situation, the student could start questioning their positionality, identity as a university student, and right to be part of the class.

Every individual belongs to multiple social groups based on positionality (e.g., language, age, gender, ethnicity, location, education, workplace, family, religion, citizenship) that changes depending on the context (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Positionality is influenced by the narrative of one's identity through the eyes of self and the eyes of other people (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Individuals have an inherent need to belong, giving importance to the emotional element of belonging. Furthermore, individuals place value and judgment on what belonging entails (Yuval-Davis, 2006). International students sometimes ask themselves, '*who am I now*?' because of the intersection between the new ways of teaching and learning they encounter at a Canadian university and what they were educated to value and believe in their home cultures. Some students may even feel caught between two worlds, balancing the duality of being and becoming (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This duality is connected to the boundaries placed on defining the characteristics of belonging. The boundaries of belonging are often influenced by hegemonic political powers, with the group becoming more exclusionary as the list of defining characteristics grows longer (Yuval-Davis, 2006). What defines the ideologies of belonging within the context of a culturally diverse classroom at university? Inclusion could be connected to such things as language proficiency, content-based knowledge, classroom etiquette, student-teacher interaction, and participation in class tasks, etc.

An inclusive learning environment for culturally diverse classes has permeable boundaries that encourages intercultural sensitivity and promotion of cultural relativism. Moving toward an inclusive classroom is recognition of the influential factors that culture plays in establishing epistemological foundations related to learning. Culturally embedded teaching and learning norms become more apparent when students with different educational experiences come together in a classroom environment.

Learning and the Influence of Culture

Issues can arise in cross-cultural learning environments because of a disconnect between students and teachers' culturally embedded values placed on the 'how' and 'why' knowledge is acquired. Educational values present themselves differently within social positions, relevance of course curriculum, organization of knowledge, and expected teacher-student classroom-based roles (Hofstede, 1986). One difference between educational systems is the philosophical underpinnings of how learning happens. Some cultures are centered on hierarchical systems, while other cultures value lateral systems (Scollon, 1999; Zhao, 2007). An ethnorelative approach to teaching considers the cultural influences to teaching and learning, which then enables an instructor to build a sense of belonging through strategies that incorporate intercultural sensitivity into the learning process.

Hierarchical and Lateral Approaches to Education

Recognition of the dynamic that cultural values play in defining the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers is an important step toward creating a community of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms. The social position of teachers and students, and whether it is hierarchical or lateral, is one of the differences of learning cross-culturally. Hierarchical systems perceive the role of education as learning knowledge *from* the teacher, emphasizing academics, knowledge, and success; while lateral systems value learning *with* the teacher, emphasizing sociality, relationships, and personal growth (Hofstede, 1986; Scollon, 1999; Zhao, 2007).

Hofstede (1986) attributes large power distance to a hierarchical approach, with teachers in an authoritative position having full control of the learning process making it teacher-centered; while, small power distance systems have a lateral approach, positioning teachers and students more closely together, with learning environments being more student-centered. Cross-cultural differences are exhibited in how respect and care are represented within teacher-student interactions. In a hierarchical approach, students demonstrate respect by listening intently, with questions sometimes used rhetorically by the teacher; whereas a lateral approach is more equalitarian valuing an active interchange among students and with the teacher fostering critical thinking and independence (Hofstede, 1986;

Scollon, 1999; Zhao, 2007). Hierarchical learning environments show care through rewards for academic performance, admiring teacher brilliance, and emphasizing the consequences for failing (Hofstede, 1986). An example would be demonstrating care for their students by putting pressure on them to study hard and get good grades. Care in a lateral facing system is demonstrated in the use of rewards for social adaptation, teacher friendliness, with less emphasis on failure (Hofstede, 1986). For example, an instructor who shows empathy by expressing their understanding of how a student is feeling. Students accustomed to learning in a system that exemplifies a specific power distance could face uncertainty understanding teaching and learning patterns in a learning environment that emphasizes a different power distance.

An instructor who fosters intercultural sensitivity understands there are differences across educational systems and works to create a learning environment that incorporates a variety of teaching and learning strategies into the structure, and thus working toward cultural relativism.

Building Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is built on having intercultural sensitivity and awareness of the connotations attributed to our behaviors and perceptions, which are influenced by prior learning experiences, value systems, and positionality (Bennett, 2004). In a culturally diverse learning environment, socio-culturally determined morals and values collide in one space. The example below, from Freeman and Li (2019), illustrates how the structure of assignments and the concept of academic rigour can differ cross-culturally.

> [In Japan] just go to class, get what the lecturer said and just prepare for exams. So it's easier, more passive than here. Because we take so many courses, the examination [in Japan] is really easier to pass. And written assignment [in Japan] is much easier than here because. . . here we, they really check [for plagiarism] strictly, but in Japan not as much. Japanese student. (Freeman & Li, 2019, p 25-26)

Recognition of socio-cultural constructions within classroom discourse and the influence of such things as language, manners, the standards of quality, and the values of right and wrong, enables an instructor to build a more ethnorelative (Bennett, 2004) classroom-based approach. An ethnorelative approach to teaching, which this paper refers to as cultural relativism, entails the instructor adapts content and teaching approaches to encourage all students to interact, fostering intercultural sensitivity among students. However, an instructor can be unaware that the decisions made to foster learning are predicated on the beliefs and values of their cultural worldview. This lack of awareness has been called cultural blindness (Gay, 2010) and ethnocentrism (Bennett, 2004). Cultural blindness and ethnocentrism are ingrained in an instructor's personal paradigm when they do not consider how the dominant role of conventional thinking of the given society is rooted in their epistemology and ontology, cultivating perceptions of good teaching irrespective of context or learner (Bennett, 2004; Gay, 2010). The result is the development of cultural hegemony; an education system that presupposes the ideologies of the dominant culture creating a universal epistemology, dismissing the multiple epistemologies represented in a culturally diverse society (Cole, 2020). An instructor teaching a culturally diverse class works toward having a culturally relative approach by being reflexive of how ideas are presented and communicated in class. The instructor strives to create an environment within which both the dominant and non-dominant cultures are represented. Examples of a culturally relative approach include such things as providing subject-specific examples that all students can relate to, ensuring students have the skills and prior knowledge to complete class activities, having an awareness of the use of colloquial language during class lectures, and diversifying interaction patterns to vary modes of participation. These examples illustrate an overt approach to teaching.

Recognition of Using an Intentional Approach

Learning is said to be a "fostering, nurturing, and cultivating process" (p. 19) that develops the conditions for growth through the social discourse of the classroom (Dewey, 2016). Instructors play a pivotal role in creating the conditions conducive to learning through their interactions with students, the facilitation of student-student interaction, how the room is arranged, and in the delivery of the curriculum (Gay, 2010). An instructor who *fosters*, *nurtures,* and *cultivates* learning uses a learner-centred approach to engage students.

An intentional instructional approach is represented in the use of a variety of teaching and learning methods, even if some methods have been dismissed by the instructor's home culture because they are perceived to be traditional, old, or ineffective. An instructor's cultural-coloured glasses may label specific values, attitudes, and behaviors as right and wrong rather than different. Observing differences will help an instructor know what questions to ask, thus creating a space in the classroom that encourages dialogue and understanding of students' prior learning experiences and cultural influences. Recognizing students for who they are and where they come from has a strong impact on perceptions of belonging, as is illustrated in the two quotations below from Li and Freeman's study (2019):

> He cares about us, each of us. Sometimes he asked us, the Asian students, "did you understand?" Like that. And I feel like oh, he is worrying about us, he can see us, he is thinking of us. Thai-Japanese student. (Li & Freemen, 2019, p. 32)

> In the first lecture the Professor put "welcome to Brazilian students" on the first slide in Portuguese and in English. I think for the first time, "oh! Someone knows we are here!" And every lecture she put in [examples of] Brazil and she says "oh in Brazil it is working this way." So she worrying about how it works in your country, I think it's nice. Brazilian student. (Li & Freemen, 2019, p. 32)

In these quotations, students had positive reactions to instructors' open inclusion of them during class and felt validated not only as students but as people. It is recognition that these students are not outsiders; they feel as though they are members of the class because of the instructor's actions. These instructors exhibit awareness of there being more to teaching than the subject matter of the course. An instructor who asks themselves questions of how and why to engage students is placing emphasis on teaching students rather than teaching only content. This instructor's willingness to question their own pedagogical beliefs and values through self-reflection can lead to a change in their teaching practice. Creating inclusive learning environments for culturally diverse classes is about finding ways for students to see themselves as members of the course, which promotes a sense of belonging.

At university, every course has a different composition of students and different subject matter; therefore, how the classroom community is built and how a sense of belonging is fostered will vary from course to course. Areas that differ could pertain to subject-specific terminology, historically centered content, learning materials, communicative style, and problem-solving strategies. Instructors need to be careful to not assume that all students have the same understanding of the concepts discussed. Consider offering different strategies to encourage participation, whether it be individually through conversation or email with the instructor, pairing work with classmates, or designing larger group activities during and outside of class time. Students may need guidance in how to effectively communicate with classmates during group activities to achieve group goals. Recognize and value everyone's opinions and experiences, even if they are different from most of the students in the class. Of central importance is for an instructor to be observant of the learning process and to scaffold expectations using questions to discern students' challenges with an open mind to include diverse perspectives. Scaffolding learning will encourage students and instructors to learn with and from each other, and develop empathy for difference and diversity, which is a step toward building authentic ways to enhance internationalization within university classrooms.

The Benefits of Internationalization

The goals of internationalization in higher education are important considerations when looking at how to create a community-based classroom that emphasizes belonging for culturally diverse groups. Internationalizing the student experience should entail students, both domestic and international, have opportunities to build relationships with one another, learn about intercultural sensitivity, and develop empathy. University classrooms bring domestic and international students together to learn specific skills and content. It is an optimal place to help students navigate relationships, build confidence, take risks, and learn from one another in a safe environment (CBIE, 2014; Ryan, 2011). However, it has been argued that the economic and educational value of internationalization have become fragmented motives creating a loss of focus of the reason for having universities (Knight & de Wit, 2018). Institutions need to look beyond the economic reasons for increasing international student enrolment to see the inherent values of internationalization (CBIE, 2014). Connected to this ideology is a recognition that universities uphold the dominant epistemology of the local context, meaning that the approach to teaching and learning suits certain students more than others (Garson, 2016). Creating inclusive community-based classrooms that foster belonging means that instructors assess the social discourse of class to enable classes to become more inclusive, equitable, and ethical to engage all students present, domestic and international (Ryan, 2011).

Moving Forward

Internationalization strategies at Canadian universities have increased the recruitment and enrolment of international students, diversifying the demographic of today's classrooms. Greater diversity in university classrooms presents opportunities for instructors and students to broaden their awareness, understanding, and acceptance of differing worldviews through classroom-based communities. This paper conceptualized building classroom-based communities for culturally diverse groups through intentional instructional approaches that nurture a sense of belonging. Instructors can create equitable learning environments by having permeable boundaries that accept and encourage divergent ideas. Students can feel they belong when an instructor is *responsive* to their opinions and prior experiences by encouraging students to co-construct meaning, which creates feelings of being valued. Integral to the move toward inclusive methods is an instructor's *recognition* of their positionality and how it is represented in their teaching philosophy and engagement of students. *Cultural relativism* is the acknowledgement of the role cultural-based values play in learning and teaching. Identifying these three characteristics is an initial step toward building an inclusive learning environment for culturally diverse classes. Jiali's story is to represent the possible experiences of international students. Jiali had a positive experience in Economics class, which increased her confidence to express her ideas and share her stories, in turn, encouraging other students to do the same. These student-based interactions broadened the collective voice of university students to learn with and from each other. Moving forward the praxis of creating inclusive learning environments at university requires more conversations with instructors and students to ask questions about what belonging means to them and fostering a culture that is open to change.

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