

How to Understand the International Students with Whom You Work

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Are international students needy? Are they intractable? Do they plagiarize? Are they inefficient in writing? Do they negotiate grades? Are these ontological questions?

Is everything they do a manifestation of their being international students? Or is there a way to understand, first, the students as human beings? Perhaps what they do is not because they are international students.

Let's face it: Internationals are strong. They are not here to receive our tender love and care. What they do need from us, fairly, is one thing, and that is understanding. It is important for college and university officials who work with international students to try to understand their students. Recognizing the international students as human beings like local students is the first step, one that goes a long way. Ask this question to yourself: what would a domestic student do in a similar situation? If the domestic student would do the same, then do not say that the international student did such and such because he or she is an international student. It's because he is a human being.

In a recent workshop I facilitated on multicultural teaching, a participant expressed her frustration: Arab students negotiate grades. They are not happy with less than the best grades. They will say that it is a social stigma to have a lower grade, and they will try everything to up their grades. I asked what she does. She said, "I stand my ground." I do not blame her for standing her ground because that's how we are trained to teach, grade, and "remain professional." But could we do something different, now that we are dealing with students who come from different cultures?

I asked the participant if she sees any positive aspect to the grade-negotiating behavior of the Arab students. She did not have anything to say

but another participant (who had never dealt with Arab students though) spoke up: “I think I would love to work with the Arab students.” Just coming to learn that they would not settle for a lower grade, she would design her syllabus in such a way that she could potentially leverage their commitment to excellence. I asked how she would do that. She answered, “I would have multiple small assignments based on each course objective. After each assignment, I would give them a chance to earn extra points or make up for the lower grade. I would give them multiple opportunities until they meet the objective satisfactorily. “After all, our objective is for them to learn.” Epiphany!

Another teacher complained: international students plagiarize. I asked what she did when that happens. She said she reported it. Again, legitimately there could be no blaming the teacher because that’s what she is supposed to do according to the university rules. I then asked participants if they could list reasons why students would plagiarize. Many of them gave interesting reasons such as lack of sleep, lack of time, too much stress of deadline, or lack of proper training on writing. One of them gave a cultural reason that he had uncovered about his students. For his students, committing brilliant lines of text to memory was considered respect to God. So, the students in this teacher’s class would reproduce texts ditto as it appeared in the textbook. Now that’s plagiarism by our standards. However, is there something that we can do about it? What would happen if those students were to be appreciated for their skills to commit to memory but were then told that when they take exact words from the text, there is a legitimate way to do so. And next we could show the multiple ways: paraphrasing, quoting, and then gradually leading to condensing and only quoting the most important keywords, while also giving credit to the original author.

When dark forces seem to be plaguing the world, educators have a responsibility to advance humanity in the positive direction. Empirical studies on international students show that they contribute to the improvement of global human society while struggling to establish themselves in the foreign lands. The first step toward the right direction is understanding your international students and then capitalizing on what they bring to the table.
