

# Cultural Competence

## 1 What is it?

Culture is integral to learning processes and environments (Colbert, 2010). Culture is an integrated system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, customs, and experiences created and shared by members of a specific group that may range from ethnic and national groups to organizational units (Gunawardena, 2013). In turn, cultural competence refers to the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from various cultural groups or belief systems different from one's own in an educational or other environments (DeAngelis, 2015).

## 2 Why is it important?

For faculty to teach all students enrolled in a course, they need to be able to acquire the knowledge and skills not only to develop a culturally sensitive curriculum that allows viewing topics through varied cultural lenses, but to also be responsive and sensitive to individual needs of students. Additionally, it is important to understand the cultural differences of students as cultural background. The perceptions of an instructor and peers that occur through the lens of culture may influence critical thinking skills, debate, discussions, expression of ideas, and other interactions within a learning environment (Bates, 2001; Bates & Poole, 2003).

## 3 How to do it?

Every student comes from a unique cultural background and has their own traditions, norms, and values that may inform and impact their learning. Therefore, a critical component of effective teaching in a diverse classroom is respect for learners that is reflected through course design and ongoing communication. We have collected

several suggestions to help your course be culturally sensitive. The resources are based on Gunawardena (2013); Irish, & Scrubb (2012); Seibert, Stridh-Igo, & Zimmerman (2012); and Stavredes (2011).

### Tips and Tricks

- **Identify the preferred way for students to communicate with you.** Some students may be more comfortable with a call, others prefer to maintain distance with an email. Attempt to accommodate students' needs whenever possible.
- **Be aware of cultural differences when designing activities.** Terminology, topics, and examples to highlight points may be perceived differently by or be unclear to representatives of different cultures (e.g., referring to US movies or shows to highlight a point). When designing activities or questions, consider whether they will be relevant and clear to all the learners.
- **Use culturally appropriate language.** Review the language used to ensure that it is clear and meaningful for all. Be aware that humor or idioms may be too difficult to understand or relate to for those coming from different countries.
- **Design and run activities to ensure that all voices can be heard.** Make sure all learners can engage and participate equally regardless of their culture, gender, or beliefs. Help students who may not be comfortable sharing their opinions (e.g., out of respect to instructor) to gain confidence through prompts or other scaffolding.
- **Provide scaffolding or alternatives, particularly, in unstructured learning environments.** Some students may feel uncomfortable in situations, where they feel uncertain (e.g., students who may be used to a teacher-centered instruction). Help learners set

learning goals and initiate interactions through prompts or other support.

- **Limit sharing your opinion during discussions.** Some students may be uncomfortable sharing their opinions or ideas that differ from instructors whom they may perceive as having greater power. Allow students to lead discussions. When joining the discussion, use prompting to continue the discussion and invite students to brainstorm further instead of providing a definitive answer or highlighting that one student was right and another was not.

## 4 Additional Resources

- Purdue offers a [Faculty Teaching Tip guide](#) and several MOOCS (see the [The Global Learning Faculty and Student Development](#) site); Purdue users can contact the [Center for Instructional Excellence](#) ([cie@purdue.edu](mailto:cie@purdue.edu)) for consultations.
- [Tools & Processes for Self-Assessment and Cultural Competence \(Georgetown University, n.d.\)](#).
- [Inclusion by design: Tool helps faculty examine their teaching practices.](#)
- [Strategies for Teaching Culturally Diverse Students](#)

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