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Constructing Culturally Safe Learning Spaces for International Students

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ABSTRACT

This commentary explores the intersection of cultural safety and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to establish inclusive and supportive educational environments for international students in UK higher education. Reflecting on our transition from international students to educators, we share insights derived from literature, academic discussions, and practical experiences, including the development of a staff workshop for the Power of Potential Conference (2024). We propose a Model of Evolving Cultural Competence that underscores cultural humility and continuous learning as pivotal to creating culturally safe learning spaces.

Through an analysis of three UDL checkpoints—sustaining effort and persistence, language and symbols, and expression and communication—we offer actionable strategies for educators to foster engagement, representation, and participation. These include integrating diverse student perspectives, leveraging multimodal resources and providing inclusive assessment methods to empower international students. Our approach challenges normative biases, promotes cultural curiosity, and addresses power imbalances, emphasising the co-creation of knowledge and mutual learning. By combining cultural safety and UDL principles, this paper advocates for a dynamic and reflective pedagogy that enhances student belonging, inclusivity, and equitable engagement. These practices aim to benefit both students and educators, fostering transformative learning environments that support diversity and cultural competence.

Keywords

cultural safety, universal design for learning, cultural competence, international students

INTRODUCTION

In the academic year 2022/23, international students comprised 26% of the total student population at universities in the United Kingdom, thereby solidifying the

nation's status as the second most favoured destination for international students worldwide (Bolton, Lewis & Gower, 2024). The growing presence of international students significantly enhances the multicultural environment within UK classrooms, prompting educators to reassess traditional pedagogical methods and prioritise the establishment of culturally safe learning spaces. In this commentary, we reflect on our journey from international students to educators and share insights derived from our experiences supporting numerous international undergraduate and postgraduate students. These insights are informed by our literature review, academic discussions, and practical experiences that contributed to the formulation of a staff workshop and presentation for the Power of Potential Conference (Sundari, Fernandez and Mauro-Bracken, 2024). We contend that culturally safe learning spaces can be cultivated through the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. By incorporating UDL principles alongside cultural safety considerations, we underscore the importance of developing culturally safe learning spaces that empower all students and foster equitable participation and engagement. Although the authors recognise the global perspectives in relation to these concepts would be important, the commentary is based on the authors' experiences in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and the actions related to supporting international students in these settings.

The concept of cultural safety originated from the experiences of the Māori people in New Zealand and has been increasingly applied within the context of the United Kingdom (Lokumage et al., 2023). At the core of cultural safety is acknowledging sociocultural differences while addressing power imbalances in educational environments. This approach endeavours to create inclusive spaces that empower marginalised groups, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety for all students. As educators who possess firsthand experience in navigating transitions between educational systems and acculturating into the UK higher education framework, we found ourselves in a unique position to discern the intentions of policies related to equality, diversity, and inclusion. Furthermore, we recognised the practical disconnects that hinder the delivery of inclusive education and the opportunities overlooked by colleagues who fail to utilise the international student cohort as a valuable resource, instead perceiving them as empty vessels requiring knowledge acquisition. Reflecting on our dual perspectives has given deeper insights into these dynamics, allowing us to better understand the gaps between policy and practice and to envision more inclusive, dynamic and intercultural educational environments.

Challenges predominantly emerge within the domain of cognition or upon our awareness of their existence. Establishing culturally safe learning spaces constitutes an emotional endeavour, transcending mere formal obligation; it necessitates introspection

and alignment with one's purpose. Therefore, we begin by introducing our model of evolving cultural competence, derived from a rigorous analysis of prevailing theories of cultural competence and discussions concerning the development of cultural competence in individuals. Next, we offer practical recommendations for translating this theoretical and perceived knowledge into practice for educators seeking to support international students in higher education.

By integrating cultural safety with three UDL guidelines (CAST, 2024)—designing options for sustaining effort and persistence (checkpoint 8), for language and symbols (checkpoint 2), and for expression and communication (checkpoint 5)—educators can ensure that diverse perspectives are acknowledged and respected, enabling students from all backgrounds to feel valued and supported. The authors have intentionally selected these three checkpoints as they all emphasise the 'support' component of UDL, concentrating on the design of multiple means for engagement, representation, and action & expression (CAST, 2024). In this paper, we will examine the pedagogical implications of these three UDL checkpoints within the framework of establishing culturally safe learning spaces for international students. And integration of our lived experience as students and educators.

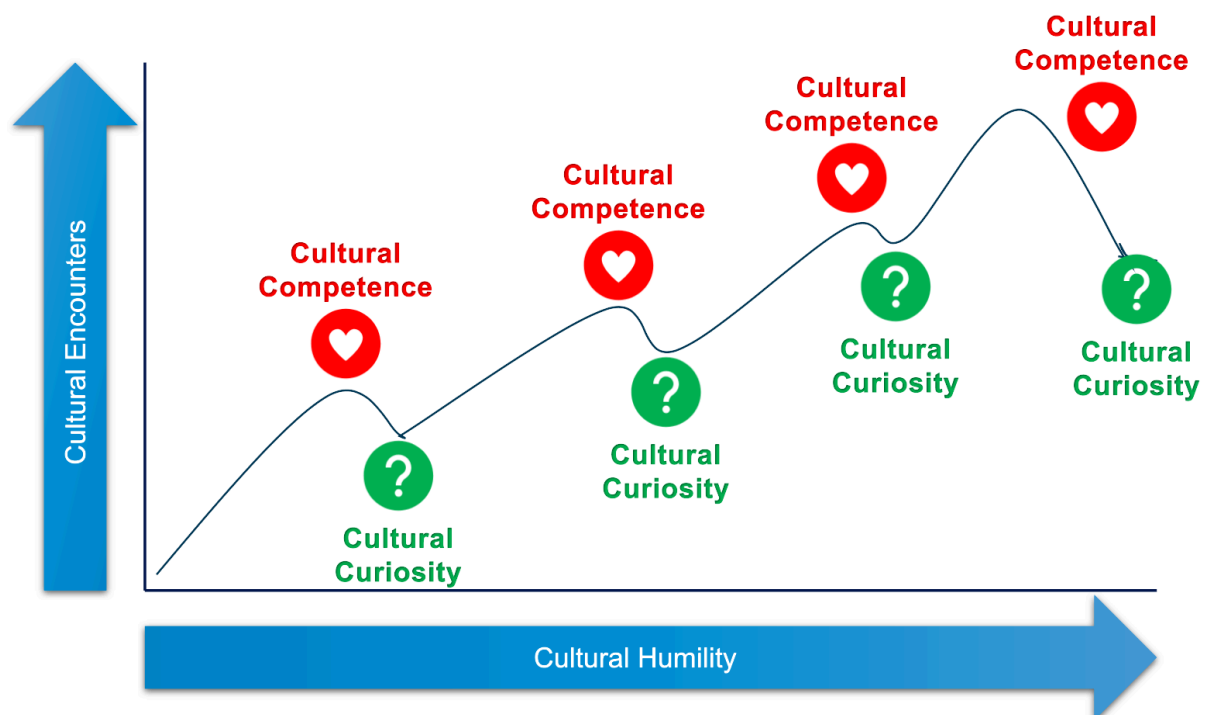
A model of evolving cultural competence

In our discussions, we consistently emphasised the critical role of educators in cultivating knowledge and understanding while exploring innovative teaching methods that are responsive, inclusive, and appreciative of the diversity present within the classroom. Such an approach fosters a culture of curiosity and inspires students to engage in enquiry about one's own and others' cultures in the context of learning. Furthermore, we underscored the necessity of alleviating fear and anxiety among educators who are facing new challenges in the context of limited professional development opportunities.

In UK higher education, cultural competence means understanding and respecting cultural differences, adapting teaching methods to meet diverse needs by using critical reflection, and fostering an inclusive learning environment to support international students academically and socially (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). However, our critique of cultural competence frameworks revealed that, although they aspire to enhance interactions and communication across cultures, they frequently fall short by overly concentrating on the acquisition of specific cultural knowledge (Li et al., 2023). This limited focus may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes and neglect to address more profound issues related to power and privilege, in addition to failing to recognise that cultural competency is not a linear process. Cultural humility, as advocated by Foronda (2020), provides a more dynamic and reflective approach,

encouraging continuous self-examination and an ongoing commitment to understanding cultural differences. This viewpoint aligns seamlessly with the principles of UDL, as it advocates for flexibility and responsiveness to the diverse needs of students (Bracken & Novak, 2019; CAST, 2024). Culturally sustaining pedagogy, as explored by Paris and Alim (2014), further substantiates this perspective by highlighting the importance of sustaining and valuing cultural diversity within the educational landscape. This approach not only acknowledges the cultural backgrounds of students but also endeavours to maintain their cultural identities within the educational context (Hanesworth, Bracken, & Elkington, 2018), thus enabling students to perceive themselves as contributors of new and relevant ideas to discourse. This culminated in our development of a Model of Evolving Cultural Competence (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: A Model of Evolving Cultural Competence



We perceive cultural competence as an ongoing journey rather than a fixed destination, as is the process of creating culturally safe learning spaces. This journey commences with the educator's curiosity about a phenomenon, concept, or situation that has not been previously encountered, as well as a demonstration of cultural humility to learn from various perspectives. This initial encounter may temporarily yield a certain level of cultural competency. However, exposure to different phenomena, concepts, or situations with diverse groups of students may reveal gaps in one's competence.

As educators, approaching each new encounter with sustained cultural curiosity can significantly enhance our sense of cultural competence. These repeated encounters of cultural learning experiences, along with a genuine willingness to listen and engage, can foster the development of cultural humility. We define cultural humility as the practice of recognising and reflecting on one's own cultural biases and limitations whilst remaining open to learning from others. It encompasses self-awareness and an understanding of diverse perspectives, promoting the practice of posing questions to facilitate mutual learning and understanding (Danso, 2018; Foronda et al., 2016). We refer to this as an evolving cultural continuum, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Openly sharing insights gained from these inquisitive cultural encounters with international students, and inviting them to reflect alongside us as educators, possesses the potential to engage them in this shared exploration and establish a foundation for creating culturally safe learning spaces. The final decline represented in the graph indicates that cultural learning is an ongoing process; hence, the cessation of engagement in cultural encounters does not ensure the maintenance of competency. This continuum not only acknowledges the dynamic nature of cultural competence, but also emphasises the necessity for continuous self-reflection and adaptation in our encounters with students from varied backgrounds.

Taking into account the imperative for educators to advance their cultural competency to promote culturally safe learning spaces, we shall now outline practical strategies derived from the supportive component of the UDL guidelines. The pedagogical implications will be analysed through the three UDL checkpoints: designing options for sustaining effort and persistence, language and symbols, and expression and communication, with the objective of establishing a culturally safe learning space for international students.

Designing options for sustaining effort & persistence

As social mobility continues to rise and the population of international students expands, undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of background, ability, and learning preferences. Simultaneously, HEIs are experiencing pressures to enhance productivity while operating with constrained resources. One approach to increase productivity is to increase the size of lecture classes, which consequently leads to a higher student-to-faculty ratio (Dean et al., 2017). In these circumstances, educators should acknowledge that they hold a viewpoint grounded in their own experience and thus should invite learners to bring their experiences into the classroom; such an open invitation provides space and relevance to the learner and enables a co-creation of learning that leverages the diversity within the classroom (Gilmore et al., 2022).

Furthermore, knowledge construction occurs through the integration of pre-existing knowledge, which is significantly influenced by familial background, educational experiences, literature, social contexts, and the cultural environments encountered throughout learners' lives (Takacs et al., 2020). The educational content presented will only be meaningful to the learners when they can establish connections based on their personal experiences and sources of identity (Ahn & Davis, 2010). Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging (checkpoints 8.3 and 8.4) transcends being merely an aspirational objective and becomes a fundamental component of effective design (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

It is important to acknowledge that the curriculum is 'normatively White' (Ladson-Bilings, 1998) and that, as educators educated in the modern Western education system, we potentially perpetuate this whiteness and the lack of cultural sensitivity (Harper et al., 2018; Meda, 2020; Thomas & Quinlan, 2023). This can further alienate international students as they are constantly attempting to find a means to relate to the content to make sense of the learning (Gaudelli, 2020). To address this issue, we should focus on clarifying the meaning of specific phrases and providing a glossary (checkpoint 8.1) to facilitate the development of knowledge from foundational to advanced concepts. Additionally, wherever possible, educators should refrain from using rhetorical language and culturally specific humour without proper context and explanation, as this will enhance inclusivity in the learning environment.

The above suggestion is not an attempt to generalise learning but to pave a level ground for all students to succeed. At the same time, learning spaces should help learners stand out for their individuality. Rather than seeing them as a collective of international or home students, introductory sessions should be used to identify the diversity present in the classroom, either verbally or by using tools such as Mentimeter or Vevox polls. Educators should encourage learners to share unique experiences about their home countries that the global audience might not be aware of, showcasing cultural curiosity and respect for the information shared by the learners. Thus, collaboration and interdependence in learning should be fostered by recognising students as active participants in the knowledge-creation process. Session plans should be designed to ensure that most students feel included in the content. By consistently engaging with this approach, coupled with a sense of humility and openness, educators can empower learners to develop their sense of belonging and make valuable contributions to their education.

Designing options for language & symbols

Academic English is ‘no one’s mother tongue’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994, p.8) yet is perceived as the standard language within educational environments (CAST, 2024). Consequently, the linguistic competencies of international students are often assessed against Western standards of communicative practices, leading to the perception that they are deficient (Alegado & Fernandez, 2025; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). This hierarchical framework, which positions a certain language as superior, implicitly or explicitly communicates a sense of inferiority to students who are non-native speakers. Such a perception can adversely affect international students’ self-esteem and willingness to participate in academic discourse, perpetuating feelings of exclusion.

We acknowledge that international students employ a variety of languages to process information and express ideas, making it impossible to accommodate every linguistic background within a learning space. However, we must actively challenge the colonial narrative of monolingualism prevalent in educational systems. It is essential to shift this narrative by leveraging students’ metalinguistic awareness as valuable learning resources, rather than viewing their usage of home languages as problematic, silencing their voices (Hélot and Laoire, 2011). This is in line with UDL guidelines in addressing biases related to language and symbols in educational environments (CAST, 2024). By enhancing accessibility in the language and symbols used in our pedagogies, we enable international students to express their knowledge and understanding through multiple means.

This can be achieved by encouraging international students to use translation tools such as iTranslate or DeepL Translate, enabling them to comprehend complex concepts in their native languages, and speech-to-text software to aid with notetaking and participation by converting spoken words into text. Educators can also incorporate infographics and other visual representations to complement verbal and written instructions (CAST, 2024), enhancing understanding through multimodal resources. Utilising closed captioning during lectures offers support by reducing language-related anxiety and enhancing comprehension and focus (Balci, Rich & Roberts, 2020). These strategies offer international students multiple entry points to engage effectively with the learning resources provided. These also promote collaboration among students by encouraging the sharing of unique perspectives and experiences, thereby fostering a psychologically safe environment. This shared space allows international students to express themselves openly, in alignment with UDL’s checkpoint 5, which promotes multiple means of expression & communication. This approach not only enhances their learning experience but also fosters a stronger sense of community within the educational environment.

Designing options for expression & communication

One of the key principles of UDL is providing multiple means of action and expression, which allows students to demonstrate their knowledge in various ways (CAST, 2024). This principle is particularly important in culturally diverse classrooms, where students may have different strengths and preferences when it comes to expressing their understanding. Checkpoint 5.2 from CAST's UDL 3.0 guidelines emphasises the importance of using multiple tools for construction, composition, and creativity.

Much of the literature on international students provides a deficit model and indicates their social isolation (Arthur, 2017; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002), highlighting their need for support (McDonald, 2014), and others assume that the learners are here to create intercultural cooperation (Campbell, 2012; Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002). However, the authors reflected on our interaction with international students and found that they are driven and purposeful in achieving their goals. Therefore, utilising UDL to empower students to demonstrate their knowledge and create opportunities for sharing their perspectives is a win-win situation. The adoption and application of a variety of methods and tools that offer different approaches to expression support the diverse needs of students and enhance their learning experience. For instance, working with colleagues and the technology team on creating inclusive activities such as storytelling, podcasts and multimedia presentations allowed students to express their ideas creatively and engage more deeply with the material from their perspectives.

Furthermore, providing opportunities to practice assessment tasks and offering time to work with others in an environment where diverse views are respected, and curiosity is fostered among their peer's increased confidence and willingness to discuss and interact more autonomously and collaboratively. It is, therefore, important to reflect on how assessments are constructed, with our underlying values and norms informing what we believe demonstrates learning (Hanesworth, Bracken & Elkington, 2018). Offering time for students to interact with these tasks and recognising various perspectives provides opportunities to develop inclusive approaches to assessment that benefit all students.

When integrating new methodologies and tools, it is crucial to recognise the potential challenges that may arise, including variations in cultural perspectives, language barriers affecting comprehension of educational terminology, access to modern technologies, and varying levels of familiarity with these methods among learners from diverse backgrounds. These challenges should motivate educators to devise innovative strategies for effective pedagogy (Kieran and Anderson, 2018) by approaching such obstacles with cultural curiosity and opportunities for pedagogical refinement (Sleeter, 2012). This necessitates seeking professional development opportunities and engaging

in dialogues with colleagues to explore and inquire about differences. Collaborating closely with students and investing in adaptive methodologies whilst developing resources that stimulate curiosity can mitigate anxiety and frustrations stemming from differences, ensuring the effective application of a variety of instructional tools.

Furthermore, when learners come from diverse educational backgrounds, it becomes vital to collaborate with them to enhance their understanding of pedagogical practices within the UK higher education system. The inclusion of student perspectives is a pivotal component of UDL and ensures their voices are integrated into the learning process (Rao, 2015). These initiatives will aid in establishing clear expectations, cultivating new skills and knowledge, and fostering a sense of belonging (QAA, 2024).

Challenges

The adoption of these strategies may present certain challenges for educators, including an increased workload associated with the integration of UDL principles, concerns regarding the use of learning technologies, and the need to balance subject matter expertise with pedagogical skills. This is particularly relevant in courses governed by professional regulatory bodies, where educators often serve more as gatekeepers of registration than as facilitators of learning. Overcoming these challenges involves providing professional development opportunities, collaborating with colleagues, and adopting scalable resources and technologies that enhance accessibility. As UK HEIs increasingly rely on international student recruitment, a more proactive approach is needed to rethink teaching practices and institutional support systems. Leveraging the existing diversity of staff and students within HEIs—by encouraging them to share their varied perspectives and strategies—can maximise potential, foster inclusive teaching practices, and create culturally safe learning spaces that support and empower all students to thrive academically, regardless of background.

Conclusion

Building on the key themes from our review, we believe fostering cultural curiosity is essential. Over two years of collaboration, we have focused on supporting colleagues to work inclusively, ask reflective questions, and enhance classroom resources to promote student participation and a sense of belonging. We advocate for students to explore diverse perspectives, enhancing their learning experience and fostering a commitment to inclusivity and mutual respect within the educational community (Foronda 2020). By integrating these principles, we aim to create culturally safe learning spaces where cultural humility and ongoing learning are prioritised, benefiting both students and educators.

Integrating these concepts of cultural safety with UDL principles helps create a more inclusive environment, particularly in higher education settings with international students. This holistic approach addresses immediate student needs and promotes long-term cultural curiosity, humility, and sensitivity among educators and students. Throughout this process, we have recognised the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation in teaching practices. Supporting colleagues in this development ensures that students feel valued and included, empowering both students and educators. Reflecting on power imbalances remains a continuous necessity. In conclusion, fostering cultural curiosity and inclusivity through reflective practices and UDL principles creates culturally safe learning spaces, not only for international students, but for all students.

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