

## NAVIGATING A NEW ACADEMIC CULTURE



For many students educated elsewhere, studying at university in Canada means adapting not only to Canadian culture in general but to the specific academic culture of the North American university.

The inquisitive, experimental and active classroom behaviour encouraged here is not necessarily part of the learner's experience in many parts of the world. In many countries, classrooms are very formal places: students are expected to speak only when called on, asking questions in class may be regarded as a sign of insufficient diligence, and asking questions or chatting with the professor outside of class may be felt to be impertinent or socially inappropriate. In some academic cultures students are expected to show deference to teachers by speaking softly and averting their eyes. For students used to this kind of classroom, OCAD's academic environment may give the impression that we don't take our teaching and learning seriously. Students from many academic cultures may be completely unfamiliar with class discussion as a form of learning. They may expect to learn from their instructor, not their peers, and be confused that, in their view, the teacher is "not teaching"!

In many cultures, teaching is highly directive. Its goal is to train students in the ideas and practices of the masters, whether in philosophy or drawing. Engagement may look very different

for students from academic cultures outside of North America. An engaged student in many academic cultures is one who takes careful verbatim notes in class, and who masters readings line by line, even committing them to memory. In assignments, students may be expected to show this mastery of the received knowledge, not to demonstrate individual or original thinking. For an undergraduate to think he or she could add something to centuries of wisdom may be considered extreme hubris. And in some cultures, expressing disagreement with the status quo, both inside and outside the academic world, can be frowned on or even dangerous. For some of our students our expectation of what we term "originality" and "critical thinking" can, at first, be deeply disorienting.

It may be helpful to think of our own expectations and conventions at OCAD not as simply "Western" vs. "non-Western," but as very specifically 21st century Canadian. After all, the classrooms Europeans and North Americans studied in just a few generations ago were much more directive and hierarchical than our own at OCAD. (They still are in many parts of Europe.) It's also important to keep in mind that North American notions of critical thinking constitute only one, culturally-specific approach to gaining knowledge and understanding. Students from cultures that value close study of wisdom accu-

mulated over centuries may see seeking out "timeless" truths as the more valid route to intellectual insight (see work by Helen Fox described on page 20).

Here are a few things you can do to help students from other academic cultures navigate the academic culture at OCAD:

### **Make expectations explicit.**

Discuss attendance and other classroom behaviour and protocol. Let students know how you expect them to approach readings.

**Give students a variety of ways to participate.** For suggestions, see "The Participatory Classroom."

**Let students know that asking questions is expected.** Tell students that asking questions in class is the norm at OCAD. Reassure them that uncertainty is fine and experimentation is essential.

**Encourage students to seek additional learning support.** Let students know that at OCAD we consider making use of office hours and using services such as the Writing & Learning Centre a sign of a diligent student, not a weak one.

### **Make space for dialogue about the expression of ideas and opinions.**

Look for opportunities in class or in small group discussion to explicitly

discuss your expectations around the expression of opinions, and disagreement with you or with course texts and other materials. Explain to students the purpose of class discussion in the context of your course. Give students an opportunity in a safe environment to discuss their own experience and expectations.

### **Try to retain some relativity in your discussion of cultural differences.**

Talk with your students about differences in expectations rather than better or worse approaches to education. As illustrated in the student story on the next page, students from other academic cultures will not necessarily see our own approach as better pedagogy.

## STUDENT STORY



I spent two years in a Chinese university so I know pretty well the difference between Canadian and Chinese universities. When I first got here in OCAD

I found teachers don't teach you a lot of things, they will only give you assignments and you go and study on your own. In China, it's a different style. Teachers and professors will push you, they will tell you what to do and even what to think. For most of the time maybe they were right. But here, everything's free, they let you think freely, they let you study on your own. You have to push yourself, so that took me quite some time to adapt to. You're always on your own, you have to talk to your friends or classmates or professors. You have to think more to bring up more questions to ask them, so they can answer you, so that you can learn.

In China it's different. I was learning Drawing and Painting in China and there was a specific style that was very popular among academic schools. Everyone was almost always drawing very similar styles. If you had something different they would say "Do you actually know how to draw?" I understand the purpose of that kind of teaching because they really train your eye, train your mind, train your ability to draw almost as real as possible and to understand things very clearly. For educational purposes it's

a very good style, but if you are doing your own work, or creating your style, having only that one style and your mind is not open, that's an obstacle to creating your own self. It's like a double-bladed sword, it has good points and bad points.

Here, the difference is you're all open, but you won't have a clear standard when you're still growing, when you're still trying to develop your own style, so you can get lost very easily.

**Max Lin**, *Environmental Design*

## RESOURCES

Writing instructor Helen Fox offers a rich description of some of cultural differences in approaches to learning, and particularly academic writing in: Fox, Helen. *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. Her book is available online at [www-personal.umich.edu/~hfox/listening.pdf](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfox/listening.pdf). [Note unusual URL [www-](http://www-)]

For a good general discussion of the culturally-based expectations of post-secondary education that students educated outside North America bring with them, see the booklet entitled *Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variation in the Classroom*, prepared by the Intercultural Communication Center at Carnegie Mellon. Available at: [www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/](http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/)

