



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

1997

Getting international students to speak up

William Rifkin
University of Wollongong

Susan Hellmundt
University of Wollongong

Christine Fox
University of Wollongong

Celia Romm
University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/overview>

Recommended Citation

Rifkin, William; Hellmundt, Susan; Fox, Christine; and Romm, Celia, Getting international students to speak up, *Overview - University of Wollongong Teaching & Learning Journal*, 4(2), 1997, 23-31.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/overview/vol4/iss2/6>

Getting international students to speak up

Abstract

They just sit there and do not say anything. I am not sure that they even prepare. No, they prepare. I know that because their written work is often quite insightful. I just wish that they would speak up in class discussion. Well, I have tried, but they have nothing to say ...

Getting international students to speak up

William Rifkin

Susan Hellmundt

Christine Fox

Celia Romm

Made possible by a University Teaching Development Grant

International students?

They just sit there and do not say anything.

I am not sure that they even prepare.

No, they prepare. I know that because their written work is often quite insightful. I just wish that they would speak up in class discussion.

Well, I have tried, but they have nothing to say . . .

How often have we heard, or even engaged in, such conversations about our International students? International students have a distinct presence on our campus: the cluster of young women from Hong Kong who always sit together; lads from Indonesia chatting in front of the Library; the solitary Swedish student in your class each semester. Yet, they also have a reputation for being reluctant to speak up in class. Furthermore, observations, surveys, and interviews indicate that International students and local students do not mix readily either in class or outside, socially (documented on our campus by Romm, Patterson, and Hill, 1994; Pe Pua, 1995). This lack of mixing, and associated feelings of not fitting in the local culture, undoubtedly confounds your efforts to get 'them' to speak up in class.

This article briefly outlines lesson plans and strategies that our experience shows stimulate class discussion by International students. These plans and strategies were developed, documented, and evaluated with the support of a University Teaching Development Grant in 1996. Most of these approaches have been used for years in subjects lectured by Fox in Education and Romm and Rifkin in Commerce. Hellmundt has catalogued these approaches and evaluated the effectiveness of transferring one such approach from one faculty to another. Her current doctoral work is a theoretical and ethnographic examination of the experiences in the university classroom in Australia of International students.

Does what I do make a difference?

As noted above, our experience told us that these plans and strategies 'work.' Hellmundt's interviews of students support these impressions. Furthermore, our project included a before-and-after survey of roughly 500 students across five subjects. The survey, developed by Romm, asked local students to report how likely they were to engage in study or social activities with their International counterparts. Similarly, International students were asked how they felt about interacting with their local counterparts (students identified for themselves whether they were 'local' or 'International'). Survey results were calculated to measure shifts over

one semester (Autumn 1996) of each student toward greater 'affinity' or greater 'alienation' toward their counterparts. That is, did Fox's Canadian postgrads in Education feel more affinity — in terms of forming study groups or having dinner together — toward her Australian students or did they feel more alienation?

Survey results for a control group, a group for which our lesson plans and strategies were not employed, indicate increased alienation on the part of locals for Internationals and vice versa. Survey results for the classes of Romm, Fox, and Rifkin are mixed but encouraging. The mixed results may reflect demographics and disciplinary culture as well as pedagogy.

Romm's classes showed a boost in affinity reported by local students but greater alienation by International students, a shift for the International students similar in magnitude to the results of the control group. Fox's class showed a boost in affinity by locals and, for the Internationals, a smaller increase in alienation than in the control group. Rifkin's class evinced no shift in affinity/alienation by locals, meaning that the drift toward alienation characteristic of the control group was not present but neither was the shift toward more affinity seen in Romm's and Fox's groups. Rifkin's International students showed the only boost in affinity of any of the test groups. In sum, Romm's strategies worked best at making the local students feel more friendly. Rifkin's strategies worked best at making the International students feel more friendly. Fox, who co-lectured with several other instructors who may or may not have used her strategies, obtained mixed results.

Plausible conclusions are that:

- (a) These approaches do make a difference;
- (b) These approaches affect locals and Internationals differently; and
- (c) The same approaches executed by different lecturers/tutors may have different impacts.

What the lecturer does seems to affect international-

local student interaction — with each other and in terms of speaking up in class — in ways that we do not fully understand, hence, the importance of Hellmundt's current study. However, we do have a sense of what boosts participation by International students. These strategies correspond to what would help any student to (1) gain a voice in the classroom and (2) learn to appreciate 'difference' along a whole range of dimensions — perspectives and values, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability/disability, etc.

In your class?

Nearly all of the following lesson plans and strategies were — and are still — employed in Rifkin's undergrad business communication class, which showed the most positive impact on International students in the survey results reported above. But will some or all of these approaches work for you? Employing even just a few of these approaches does seem to have an impact, according to our survey results plus other, anecdotal reports. Where do they work? These methods have been used (to our knowledge) at the University of Wollongong in Education, Management, Business Systems, and Marketing. There is also promise for their use in teaching physics and chemistry, where some of the methods were developed (Tobias and Rifkin, 1992).

Interaction strategies

Here is a list of ways to stimulate class discussion that appear to make it easier for International students to gain a voice. You may recognise these interaction strategies as what an effective lecturer or tutor should do anyway. Hellmundt's analysis of the literature echoes this sentiment. Strategies used to enhance critical thinking are precisely the ones that stimulate input by International students. They are strategies that highlight the use of 'difference' for learning purposes.

Each strategy was devised, and should be executed, with a view to (a) provide an experiential, student-centred slant to activities that enables building from

the familiar, what students already know, to examine class concepts as well as to make international comparisons; and (b) provide varied forms of student organisation and classroom roles, to develop students' abilities to work individually and as a team, learning how to delegate and share responsibilities. Some strategies were developed by us, others were adapted or borrowed, and others have been built upon by colleagues.

- Students in lecture and tutorial sit in a **circle with desks behind them or otherwise out of the way** to reduce physical and symbolic barriers; a circle provides easy shifting to small group discussion; choice of room is an issue; physical ease of grouping and regrouping students is essential to permit students to leave single-culture clusters.
- Students **alternate turns** responding to the lecturer's or tutor's questions so that all can give input; turns can occur by lottery, by lecturer/tutor's request, by going around the room, or by volunteering; the lecturer/tutor needs to learn to **wait** for a response to establish a precedent and pattern of waiting, which International students say is much appreciated.
- Students are asked **by name** for their opinion or contribution, a tradition in some cultures; hearing one's name can bolster a sense of security and belonging, which can lead to more active participation.
- Students can **keep a list, as birdwatchers do, of the names** of — and possibly other details about — each person in the classroom with whom they have spoken; this written list of names can help students to remember names in other languages that may seem unfamiliar to them; also, as above, a sense of belonging can be heightened.
- Students are given opportunity to **ask each other questions** about their culture, habits, perceptions, etc.; each respondent is then an 'expert'.
- Students are invited to **read from overheads**, and/or to translate the overhead into their preferred

language; it is an easy task that helps students to hear their voices in the classroom, sometimes for the first time.

- Students **deliberate in small groups** and report back to class; choose a different 'reporter' for each stage of an activity; this strategy is effective with even the most reticent students; the student reporting can sense group support, which makes risking 'face' easier.
- Students **write results of small group discussion on butcher's paper** to focus effort within the group and for displaying so that others may read results as the group reports out; time spent by students getting markers and paper is an important period for free discussion and sensemaking as well as for relieving tension; International students can often display more fluency in English when they write than when simply asked to speak; this display of English-language competence in a small group can reduce barriers between local and International students.
- Students are separated into roles or discussion groups for in-class activities via **separate slips of paper thrown into the air**; students have to find others with the same number/letter/colour on their slip of paper to form a group to do the activity, which can be described on the slip of paper or on an overhead; student cliques can be broken up this way, and students can be mixed culturally, though students who still need to cluster will find a way to do so until they feel safe not doing so; students get to know their classmates, which can build in them the confidence to contribute openly.
- Students are permitted to give short **oral presentations in their own language** with English subtitles on overheads; this strategy has been shown to be highly effective in letting the personalities of 'shy' International students show through; it legitimates diverse voices and thoughts, and it is a big confidence builder for International students and an insightful experience for local students.

- Students are asked for written **feedback** every four weeks about the lectures, tutorials, assignments, etc.; those who do not speak readily can still have a 'voice' heard; all students get to critique the learning process, which can lead to buy in and a sense of ownership of the process; students can also comment on intercultural interaction, so that meta-talk about intercultural communication can be engaged in; the lecturer/tutor summarises the feedback on an overhead and responds to students in a subsequent week.
- Have students **discuss norms of a classroom in the culture** from which they come; keep querying about these norms during the term whenever a new kind of activity is employed; students may be more ready to deviate from their norms when they know that their exploratory effort is acknowledged and appreciated.

Lesson plans

The material that you currently present can be adapted to enhance intercultural interaction and boost the confidence of International students. The following lesson plans, though used in Management and Education, are designed to adapt to other disciplines and varied subject matter. Try to overlay an approach on your plans to cover specific material. For example, oral reports on laboratory work can be framed within an imaginary, scientific conference with delegates from different cultures (an approach that a colleague at another university reported at the HERDSA '97 conference).

Employing the lesson plan outlines given below may cause you to feel that you are lightening up on class content in order to focus on intercultural communication processes. However, there is an argument that teaching students the process of learning within a discipline is more important than hastening to cover an array of content — 'covering less means revealing more' (quoted in Tobias, *They're Not Dumb, They're Different*, Research Corporation, 1990). This strategy of increasing the focus on learning processes is discussed

and documented in Rifkin, Norton, and Dodd's article in the previous issue of *Overview* (1997). Whether you believe in this philosophy or not, it may be worth experimenting with it to test your assumptions about who in your classroom needs to be the major source of insight about class content — yourself or students' classmates.

Here are outlines of three lesson plans plus variations on these lesson plans and outcomes that you might expect. Following these plans are descriptions of a couple of related activities. These activities are more subtle variations on what you may do normally, but they have proven nevertheless quite revealing to students about intercultural communication.

Activity 1: Planning an event

Rationale and intended outcomes

- Students practice and enhance their organisational abilities and strategies on a task they find relevant and probably have some familiarity with;
- Develop abilities to work individually and as a team, learning how to delegate, share responsibilities and overcome barriers to communication in planning an event;
- Create an awareness of commonalities as well as differences among cultures in students' views of gatherings;
- Examine the characteristics of the different roles people play within organisations and in different situations and reflect on cultural stereotypes;
- Generate a critical awareness of the impact of generational differences as well as cultural considerations when planning an event for elders, younger people, friends, or colleagues; and
- Create greater interaction among participants through experiential, student-centred learning activity based on a topic familiar to students.

Materials and time needed

Few materials, just pens and paper, are needed to *plan* the 'event'.

Materials needed to *hold* the event depend on certain decisions. Students need to decide: who the event (party, industrial action, convention) is for and who should be invited; how the invitations and publicity should be written and distributed; what sort of food/drink/catering would be appropriate; what sort of presentation, entertainment, or public address format is needed; what sort of clothing would be appropriate; would gifts or awards be appropriate and, if so, who would give them to whom, how, and how much would be appropriate to spend; what sort of venue to organise; how the venue should be decorated/set up; when stages of the event should be and for how long; what they want to achieve, *that is*, how will they know if it has been a success or otherwise.

Students will need to discuss the rationale and the cultural implications for the decisions they have made. They will also need to organise and delegate responsibilities.

The time allocated to this activity may be varied according to one's particular program. As little as twenty minutes or as much as a series of one-hour meetings could be used, with meeting times either inside or outside the class time.

This activity can work whether or not the event is actually held.

Example and outcomes

In the Faculty of Education, two 'experimental' tutorial groups of the total of seven groups in the Curriculum subject for Graduate Diploma in Education students were given a 'party' activity. Each of the two groups comprised around 24 students, approximately half of whom were Canadian, and another four or five in each group who identified themselves as Australian with a language/cultural background other than English speaking. The activity was suggested as an example of a classroom activity for schools to encourage intercultural communication and group work. A period of 55 minutes was allotted to the activity planning.

Instructions to students

- (a) Each of the tutorial groups was asked to identify four 'experts' from a cultural background other than Anglo-Australian (English speaking and born in Australia). (5 minutes)
- (b) In each tutorial group, participants were advised that they were to organise themselves into four groups of six people, with one identified expert per group. (5 minutes)
- (c) The expert was to advise their group on aspects of why in their culture the celebration was important, who would be invited, what needed to be organised, what would be the expected outcomes of the party, and how it could be evaluated as to its success or not. (15 minutes)
- (d) Following the planning, each group was to choose a person other than the expert to report back the group's plan to the whole tutorial, highlighting what was unique to the expert's cultural background, and what was common to others' experiences. (4 minutes per group = 20 minutes)

Students quickly sorted themselves into groups and decided on the type of party, its purpose and organisation. The groups' parties included an Icelandic celebration of the beginning of a new season, a Canadian 21st birthday party, a British-Australian celebration of a grandmother's 70th birthday, a Croatian-Australian wedding party, and a French-Canadian 25th wedding anniversary.

Much interest and amusement was generated at the types of food ordered, the kinds of gifts expected, the differences between a 'family' and a 'friends' party, the expectations of alcohol consumption (or not), and the differences in expected behaviours and outcomes between parties organised for younger people and those organised for older people. Speakers had to check back with the 'expert' and their group that their report was an accurate record of the group's plan.

During the wrap-up debriefing and discussion, the main conclusion was that generational differences (and also

regional differences within one country, or even traditional differences within families) were greater than cultural (language, ethnicity and nationality) differences. The students then concluded that a generation gap was in fact a cultural difference. Complementary outcomes were that students worked together across cultures to plan a mutually enjoyable occasion; learned from each other about similarities and differences; learned to organise themselves and work collaboratively with 'experts' and each other; and learned ways in which to organise a classroom of students into teams with members of each team playing different roles.

In Business Communication, a version of this activity is used near the end of the term to help students to synthesise material. Students divide into groups in order to design one of the following events — a bank robbery in Ulan Bator, a vaccine program to prevent gum chewing among students in Niger, blowing up the bridge across the Bosphorus secretly but so nobody gets hurt, building a library in Fort Dawson, Canada, and sending greetings to beings from another planet. This range of events to design indicates that it might also work to propose design of activities related to specific professions and disciplines but set in other cultures. This activity seems to generate a lot student enthusiasm and creativity although students do need to be reminded of the intercultural elements and the importance of employing class concepts.

Activity 2: Finding an unusual item and writing a report describing the process of finding it

Rationale and intended outcomes

- Students develop and get a chance to appreciate networking skills as part of research in the workplace — the unusual nature of the item* usually necessitates networking, asking friends and family for the item or ideas on where it might be (**Rifkin's students sought 5-year-old socks, an item that seemed as realistically unusual as the six-inch rod of tungsten, two inches in diameter, whose quality met military specifications, which Rifkin sought as a young engineer*).

- Practicing oral and written communication skills for diverse audiences; asking for the item and then drafting a formal memo or other type of report to recount this unusual experience and document that the object fits the criteria specified.
- Identifying characteristics, skills, and strategies that enable one to engage in successful networking.
- Discovering and demonstrating the correct format for writing a business memo or any other selected format for the write up when that format has not been described by the lecturer.

Furthermore, by comparing their results, students can see differences and similarities among cultures in regard to aspects very familiar to students, such as the old socks that my class seeks. In addition, reporting to one another how they found their socks reveals to Australian students skills in communicating strategically that their International counterparts possess. My students query one another about this activity in an exercise where they practice on each other skills of interviewing, surveying, and focus group facilitation.

Materials and time needed

Students can complete this assignment in a week. The unusual item being sought must be available locally, but not too readily, from retail merchants, second-hand shops, or home storage. Debriefing in class can take fifteen minutes to an hour. You will need a box in which to collect the bulky homework and potentially clips suited to attaching the homework report to the item.

Example and outcomes

Our experience in business communication is based on having asked students to find a five-year-old sock and write a memo describing the process and the networks used. They were also asked to attach the sock, washed and in a plastic bag, to the memo.

Students received this activity with a mixture of disbelief, confusion, excitement, and bemusement. Many were quite surprised at how much and how well they used

their networking skills to find the sock. There was much comparison of networking skills, particularly among the International students, who used a variety of communication strategies to find the sock (some explained that they did not have old clothes at hand). Local students also reported a range of communication skills used and were surprised at how easily they did manage to find a sock. Considerable discussion was generated among the participants in the tutorials, comparing results. The excitement helps to 'shame' bludgers, who brought in an easily found sock from their own drawer, even when instructed not to. The more formal part of the exercise, *that is*, writing a memo seemed to be secondary, although most of them were successful in finding the correct presentation.

A reminder for markers: tell students to put their sock in a plastic covering. The smell, even with very clean socks, can be overpowering.

The unusual nature of the assignment can stimulate informal discussion among students, which can foster engagement in the class. Also, discussion with people outside the class to find the item can generate 'buy-in.' That is, these outsiders may gain interest in the class that can generate follow-up questions in later weeks that reinforces student engagement in the class. The beginnings of such 'bonds' with the community can help to raise the confidence of International students. New friends are made.

Activity 3: Homework to find words in different languages

Rationale and intended outcomes

- Students approach someone from another culture as a resource.
- Networking skills are practiced by asking for information that is familiar.
- Voices of all students are legitimated by having their language included in the search and/or write-up stage.
- Awareness increased of normative cultural implications of asking for words in another

language, particularly a swear word.

- Understanding gained of how Australians are seen to communicate from different cultural perspectives.

Materials and time needed

The homework assignment can be completed in a few days. Debriefing the results can take from twenty to fifty-five minutes of class time. No special resources are needed other than pen and paper.

Example and outcomes

Students were asked to find someone from a culture, other than their own, where English is not the first language. They were to ask for slang for 'hello', 'goodbye', 'food', and a swear word. Adding the swear word could be the key to making this activity work. Students were also required to ask that person for comments about communicating with Australians, in particular, what the person interviewed likes, what could be better, and what still seems strange for the person in communicating with Australians.

For debriefing, students are asked to write their words on the blackboard in the relevant columns — language, hello, goodbye, food, swear word.

From the degree of laughter in the room, there was a sense of recognition and of validation of each language and culture being represented. Some students reported difficulties in being given a swear word as the person asked did not want the word used in an inappropriate setting. Others had been made aware of the different cultural implications in the use of the swear words, particularly when accompanied by different gestures.

Students' findings about how Australians are seen to communicate were remarkably similar. Many reported that their respondent found that Australians spoke too fast and used too much slang, but they were seen as friendly, outgoing, and frank. Several wrote that they found it strange that some Australians walk around with no shoes, that they say 'hello' to anyone, including

people they do not know, and the general casualness of the place, which was viewed as warm, relaxed, and friendly.

Variations on this activity could include adding words of affection to the list of words to find or words related to a specific class topic and their definitions in that other culture.

Related activities involving translation

A variation of the activity above can be used within a classroom. Early in the semester, MBA students studying business ethics and law have been asked to write on the board key terms, such as 'ethics', 'law', 'bribe', and 'morals', in their own languages. After a pause of thirty seconds, students will begin to come to the board. Within ten minutes, words in ten languages will fill the board. Chinese and Japanese symbols can be compared, Arabic script examined. The specific meanings of the terms in each language are discussed, a kind of capsule etymology. Having students write on the board early in the semester, even in the first class, is intended to give them a sense of ownership of classroom space, of access to discussion media. This activity has proven to be quite an ice-breaker, particularly for International students but also for non-Anglo, Australian students.

Another, related exercise is to give students homework instructions in three parts with each part in a different language. Students gain an understanding that the interpretation of meaning can be lost or miscommunicated in translation, particularly when something is translated twice (from English into another language and then back into English). They can also gain an insight and appreciation of working and learning in a foreign language, where one needs to rely on translations by oneself or others.

For this exercise, we have had selected students in private translate the homework instructions into three

different languages. The instructions are formatted so that each of the three steps — each one in a different language — can be separated. This formatting enables the instructions to be randomly distributed by tossing them into the air. Students scramble to pick up one or two of the steps and network with each other to get the remaining steps. They try to determine what languages are present on the sheets and what languages their classmates might speak. The International students become resources and the Australian students learn foreign words. Distributing these slips of paper takes about five minutes of chaos. Doing it at the end of the class gives students time after class to find a translator among their classmates.

Many students in one lecture group had considerable difficulty in translating and following the instructions. Some seemed not to realise that they were to collect three parts to the homework. Others thought they only had to fax the instructions (faxing a story to the instructor was the assignment) and not complete the work. Some translations were off the mark due to word choice in the student's translation and due to format being misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Students in a different lecture group, however, succeeded in following the instructions with little difficulty, although many of them complained about the cost of sending a fax. Others simply used their initiative and found the cheapest place from which to send it. With this group, there was an air of excitement when they began to ask for people to translate for them. The translators, too, seemed to enjoy being a resource for others in the class.

This activity seems well suited for use as a variation on a weekly homework assignment, which is just how it has been employed. Debriefing in class can explore assumptions about translation (such as subtitles on TV) and about the nature of written instructions in general.

Conclusion

There you have it, a set of interaction strategies, lesson plans, and related activities designed to enhance intercultural interaction. Employing these activities and strategies and developing your own in the same spirit does seem to make a difference, according to our survey and interview results. Local and International students do not mix readily, and when you let them stay apart, initial survey results indicate that a sense of mutual alienation increases. Limited efforts to get them to mix seem to have limited impact. In addition, there is evidence that an intercultural *ethos* in a lecturer's style and strategy is as important as the particular activities in which students engage. That is, these activities done by a lecturer without the 'right' *ethos* may not have the impact that they do when done by one who understands and has internalised the spirit of reflection and reflexivity required to deal with 'difference'. However, there is still much to be learned about what enables students of different cultures to mix readily.

Please consider trying the approaches outlined above and relay to us your questions and experiences. We are also interested in hearing about your own methods

of enhancing participation by International students. We are incorporating this material into modules for use in a variety of disciplines to enhance students' professional communication skills (see the blurb on the Communication Skills Modules project in this issue of *Overview*). We need to know what information beyond what you read above will make such material the most useful.

References

- Pe Pua, R., 1995, *Being an Asian on Campus: A Look into Cross-Cultural Experiences of Overseas Students*, Centre for Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong.
- Romm, C., Patterson, P., and Hill, C., 1994, 'Overseas Students in Australia . . .', *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, vol.5, no.2.
- Tobias, S. & Rifkin, W., 1992, 'Experience Counts: Science for the Adult Learner,' *Liberal Education*, vol.78, no.4, pp. 32-37.
- Tobias, S., 1990, *They're Not Dumb, They're Different: Stalking the Second Tier*, Research Corporation: Tuscon, Arizona.