

Introduction to the International Classroom

Further Resources I Britain

Jane's international classroom

Jane Miller is a senior lecturer of Media Studies at a British university, with 10 years of research and teaching experience. Last year she was asked to teach her Master's level module in Digital Identities and Social Media to a class that consisted of approximately 30 students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds: 16 British nationals and 14 international students, the majority from Europe, a few from Asia, and a couple from North America.

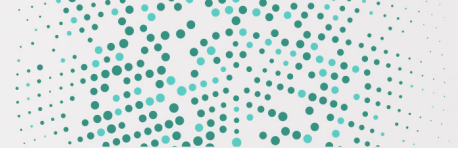
She had enjoyed teaching this seminar based module to British students in previous years, and had developed a number of effective teaching and learning activities over the years, including group discussions, short writing assignments, and student presentations. She was a confident teacher who regularly received very positive feedback from her students. Nevertheless she was a little concerned before she started teaching the class this time. She had no experience teaching such a diverse student group from many different countries and educational backgrounds and was unsure whether her materials and her teaching approach would engage this class in a similar way. Despite this she was cautiously optimistic that she would be equally successful with this group.

Once she started teaching, the module unfolded quite differently from what she had expected. First of all, Jane noticed that she was spending more time on the module than usual. The international students sent her emails with all kinds of questions, not only about the module and its subject matter but also about housing matters and other personal issues affecting their lives in Britain.

Jane also had to spend much more time preparing for her course by developing examples and case studies that were relevant to the international students. All in all she felt things were going well though. Her lectures and other teaching activities seemed to be well received by the class. The students didn't complain or disagree with her in discussions. However, she also noticed that they weren't nearly as keen to ask questions in class as the previous cohorts had been.

The classroom dynamics were also quite different. The international students and the British and US students spontaneously formed their own discussion and project groups. At first this seemed to work well, at least for the British/





US groups. All of them were native speakers of English who were clearly used to expressing their own views confidently and discussing them with others.

On the other hand, Jane noticed that in the international student groups, some of the students said very little. Similarly, in the class discussions, the British and US students contributed more frequently and confidently whereas some of the international students remained quiet.

She had to spend much time and effort eliciting answers from some of them – often failing to really engage them. It seemed as though they were unprepared or had difficulty expressing themselves in English. However, about mid-semester the students all gave oral presentations in class, and Jane found that the quality varied considerably across the whole class regardless of the students’ nationality. Even so, during an oral evaluation at the end of the module, one of the British students announced that while the British students liked the international students and in principle didn’t mind having them in class, they also thought it was a waste of time working with some of them and listening to their presentations due to their ‘poor language skills’. The discussion got heated, and a couple of the international students accused the British students of ‘ethnocentrism’. Some of them even blamed Jane and the British/US students because their local accent was very difficult to understand, which made it hard for the international students to participate in class.

When it came to marking the students’ coursework – a 6000 word paper on a topic of the students’ choice – Jane was disappointed because the results were less than satisfactory. The marks were lower than in previous years, and a few of the students were caught plagiarizing. Many of the international students’ papers did not contain enough critical analysis, and some excessively cited her own work, repeated the comments she had made in class or even copied all of the text on her slides. A few of them used translated sources from their local contexts that Jane had never heard of. Jane spent considerable time giving feedback on the papers to each individual student. To her surprise she received complaints about her course, with some students stating that they did not feel that she had appropriately explained what was expected from them, or how they should prepare for the classes and the assessments.

Jane realized that there were quite a few things she needed to change next time she was to teach this module.

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