

Cosmopolitan Pedagogy: Teaching Higher Education to International Students

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Abstract—This paper examines the pedagogical challenges inherent in teaching value-based disciplines such as social work and community services to international students in western higher education contexts. Drawing on established adult learning theories and socio-religio-cultural analysis, it argues that educators must develop a cosmopolitan pedagogical framework that accounts for the complex interplay of eastern and western cultural values. The paper identifies the specific ambiguities that students from developing countries may encounter when navigating western professional ethics, and proposes that transformational, experiential, and social learning theories offer effective frameworks for addressing these challenges. Broader contextual factors, including family expectations, financial pressures, and personal characteristics, are also considered. The discussion, while centered on social work and community services, holds relevance for educators across human service disciplines more broadly.

Keywords—cosmopolitan pedagogy, international students, adult learning, transformational learning, social work education, intercultural competence

I. INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly common for students from developing countries to pursue higher education in Western nations such as Australia, England, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. These students arrive as products of the eastern cultural environments in which they were raised; however, once enrolled in their host institutions, they encounter curricula and pedagogical approaches shaped predominantly by western epistemological traditions. The intersection of these two cultural paradigms constitutes a critical juncture that educators must navigate with care, particularly those who teach in value-laden disciplines such as social work and community services—fields that are explicitly concerned with respect, dignity, human rights, and social justice.

Whilst these values enjoy broad recognition across world cultures, the manner in which eastern and western societies interpret, enact, and enforce them can differ substantially. As a social work and community services academic who has both lived in and taught across eastern and western cultural contexts, the author has observed firsthand the significance of this dynamic most acutely in

private higher education institutions, where the student cohort is composed almost exclusively of international students.

This paper seeks to illuminate the potential ambiguities that students from eastern backgrounds may encounter when immersed in western professional frameworks, and to argue, accordingly, that effective pedagogy in this context requires not only proficiency in adult education theories but also facility with socio-religio-cultural analysis. Although the discussion is directed primarily at educators in social work and community services, it carries implications for practitioners across adjacent human service disciplines, including nursing, psychology, and education.

This paper draws on a combined framework of reflective practitioner inquiry and conceptual analysis to present a systematic, critical examination of an educator's practice experience, with the aim of contributing to shared knowledge in the field of international higher education. It should be noted that the discussion focuses exclusively on teaching students from developing countries within a Western country context.

The term *cosmopolitan pedagogy* is used here to set this analysis apart from intercultural or culturally responsive pedagogy, approaches that typically deal with cultural difference on an individual, case-by-case basis. This analysis instead seeks to identify the barriers to education that emerge from cultural difference at a broader level, rather than treating each student's cultural background as a separate, self-contained case to be addressed on its own.

The term should also be distinguished from existing conceptions of cosmopolitan moral education or cosmopolitan education in morality, which generally describe a non-dogmatic, inquiry-based approach grounded in shared humanity and ethical interaction. That is not the sense intended here. Instead, *cosmopolitan* is used in its literal sense: a classroom made up of students from many different cultures, ethnicities, and religions, brought together in an international setting. *Cosmopolitan pedagogy*, then, refers to educators' awareness of the cultural differences present across their student body as a whole, and of how those differences shape learning in general terms, an awareness that in turn informs a teaching practice responsive to all these factors at once.

II. DESIGNING ADULT EDUCATION COURSES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Higher education institutions have long drawn upon adult learning theories to inform the development and delivery of their courses. This approach reflects the well-established understanding that adults learn differently from children, given that adult cognitive development is complete relative to that of younger learners. According to Knowles [1] and Moll [2], adults tend to be self-directed, goal-oriented, and motivated by practical concerns. Their accumulated life experience also enables them to connect new knowledge to prior understanding, facilitating deeper and more meaningful learning.

Knowles, who is widely regarded as the foundational theorist of adult learning, also known as andragogy, proposed that adult learning is structured around five core principles: self-concept, experience, readiness, orientation to learning, and motivation. These principles have since guided educators in designing courses that are both engaging and applicable to real-world contexts.

In addition to Knowles' andragogical framework, a range of complementary theories inform the design and delivery of adult education courses. These include experiential learning, which centers on cycles of doing and reflection [3, 4]; self-directed learning [5]; project-based learning [6]; transformational learning [7, 8]; action learning [9]; and social learning theory [10, 11]. Each offers distinct insights into how adults acquire, process, and apply knowledge, and together they constitute a rich theoretical resource for educators working with diverse learner populations. These theories continue to hold relevance, according to current research. Baumgartner and Carr-Chellman [12] concluded that core learning theories continue to hold value even as growing learner diversity and evolving technology reshape teaching and learning. Kerkhoff [13] investigated cosmopolitanism, critical pedagogy, and teacher perceptions to better understand how increasing global mobility, digital connectivity, and rising nationalist sentiment influence the teaching of critical cosmopolitan literacies. Her findings revealed that participants were largely receptive to integrating cosmopolitan dispositions and global perspectives into their classrooms, pointing to strategies such as using global literature, framing discussions to foster empathy, and applying inquiry-based methods to connect local and global issues. Hodge *et al.* [14], in their analysis of adult learning theories, concluded that these theories resist being confined as a fixed scientific object, consistently exceeding the boundaries that formal theories try to place on them.

III. FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DELIVERING COURSES TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students enrolled in social work and community services programs in Western countries face a distinctive set of challenges. These disciplines exist, in large part, to serve the needs of vulnerable citizens—individuals who are at risk of harm, marginalization, or

social exclusion. Consequently, a substantial portion of the curriculum is dedicated to professional ethics (protecting human rights, respecting individuals' preferences and autonomy, non-judgmental attitude etc.), and to preparing students to engage compassionately and appropriately with at-risk populations. This emphasis brings to the fore a particularly significant tension: the point at which the values instilled by students' countries of origin intersect with the professional and ethical expectations of their host country.

A. Value-Based Professions

For students from developing countries, the concept of a formal welfare system is frequently unfamiliar. Yet they find themselves enrolled in a profession whose entire curriculum revolves around such a system. At the outset, these students may struggle to comprehend the foundational logic of welfare provision, let alone to internalize the professional values—respect, dignity, non-judgmental attitude, and non-discrimination—that underpin practice within it.

Compounding this challenge is the matter of social exposure. Students who have attained sufficient resources to pursue overseas education typically belong to middle-class families in their home countries. In societies characterized by class stratification and stigma, such students may have had limited contact with the very populations they are being trained to serve. As a result, they may find it more difficult to develop empathy for certain vulnerable groups than peers who have grown up within a Western social welfare context.

Several concrete examples illustrate the nature of these tensions. Contemporary Western frameworks largely conceptualize drug, alcohol, and gambling addictions as health conditions requiring therapeutic intervention; in contrast, the cultural environments of some students may frame these as matters of individual moral failing or character weakness. Similarly, some students may have religious or cultural prohibitions against physical contact with unrelated individuals of the opposite sex, which can present practical difficulties in care-based roles, for instance, supporting a person with a disability or an elderly client requiring physical assistance. Furthermore, students whose faith or cultural background does not affirm LGBTQI+ identities may experience significant internal conflict when required to provide non-discriminatory services to members of these communities.

These examples underscore the importance of educators developing literacy in the socio-religio-cultural backgrounds of their international students. Without such understanding, educators risk misinterpreting student behavior or inadequately preparing students for the ethical demands of professional practice.

B. Adult Learning Theories

A number of adult learning theories offer practical frameworks for addressing the pedagogical challenges described above. Three are of particular relevance: transformational learning theory, experiential learning theory, and social learning theory.

1) Transformational learning theory

Mezirow's [7] transformational learning theory holds that, whilst an individual's personal beliefs and cultural assumptions shape their worldview, they retain the capacity to revise those beliefs through critical reflection and rational discourse. This perspective is especially pertinent for educators working with international students whose professional formation requires them to examine and, where necessary, challenge deeply held values.

In practice, educators can apply this framework by creating structured opportunities for students to reflect on their own value systems and to recognize the unconscious biases that may inform their perceptions of future clients. Facilitated discussion, critical incident analysis, and reflective journaling are among the pedagogical tools that can support this process. The goal is not to dismiss students' cultural backgrounds as irrelevant, but to enable them to hold their values alongside the ethical requirements of their profession in a critically aware and professionally accountable manner.

2) Experiential learning theory

Kolb's [3] experiential learning theory posits that learning is most effective when it occurs through active experience followed by structured reflection. This cycle of doing and reflecting enables learners to move from abstract conceptualization to concrete application—a transition that is particularly important for students who may lack direct exposure to the populations they will serve.

Role-play activities are a particularly effective expression of this approach. By simulating real-world practice scenarios, role-plays provide students with a hands-on learning experience that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional application. Crucially, requiring students to inhabit the perspective of a client—to consider how it might feel to be in a position of vulnerability—can be a powerful catalyst for empathy development. This is of special value for students who, by virtue of their social backgrounds, have had limited lived experience of disadvantage or marginalization.

3) Social learning theory

Bandura's [10] social learning theory proposes that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and social interaction. In the context of a diverse international classroom, this theory highlights the pedagogical potential of the students' varied life experiences.

Within any cohort, some students will have grown up in affluent circumstances with little exposure to hardship, whilst others may have lived alongside people with disabilities, navigated poverty, or otherwise experienced conditions that have sharpened their awareness of vulnerability. Through structured peer-sharing activities such as discussion exercises, case-based group work, or experiential debriefs, the insights of the latter group can be mobilized to enrich the learning of their peers. Students who have direct experience of working with or supporting vulnerable individuals can also contribute

meaningfully to collective understanding, enhancing the depth and authenticity of classroom learning.

C. Other Influential Factors

Beyond the cultural and professional dimensions discussed above, a range of additional factors shape the educational experiences of international students, irrespective of discipline. Educators who are attuned to these contextual variables are better positioned to support students experiencing academic difficulties and to avoid attributing poor performance to factors that are, in fact, situational rather than academic.

1) Financial circumstances and family dynamics

The financial circumstances of international students are often substantially more precarious than those of their domestic counterparts. In the author's experience, virtually all international students are engaged in paid employment whilst studying full-time typically in shift-based, low-wage roles. For a significant proportion, this economic pressure is intensified by obligations to remit money to family members at home, particularly in cases in which parents have taken out loans or mortgaged property to finance their child's airfare and initial tuition fees. The considerable gap in purchasing power between Western and Eastern currencies further compounds this burden.

The cumulative effect of full-time study combined with demanding employment can result in chronic fatigue, reduced capacity for academic engagement, and, ultimately, underachievement. Educators who understand this context are better equipped to respond appropriately when students present with inconsistent academic performance.

2) Personal characteristics

International students are not a homogeneous group. They vary widely in their intellectual ability, emotional resilience, language proficiency, and prior life experience. Some students will have navigated difficult childhoods that have equipped them with considerable resilience [15]; others may have been raised in highly protective family environments that have left them less well-prepared for independent living and the demands of tertiary study. Differences in English language proficiency, social confidence, and cultural familiarity with Western norms of communication will also shape students' ability to participate fully in coursework and to seek support when needed.

3) Other contextual factors

Numerous additional situational factors may also affect the academic trajectories of international students. Homesickness, social isolation, difficulties forming friendships, romantic relationship formation and breakdown, and unexpected events such as pregnancy or illness can all disrupt a student's focus and capacity. Financial stressors, including the timely payment of tuition fees, meeting rental obligations, and accessing basic healthcare, constitute a further layer of concern. Taken together, these factors constitute a complex ecology of influence that educators must hold in view

when supporting international students through their studies.

Fig. 1 presents a schematic representation of the principal factors influencing the educational experiences of international students.

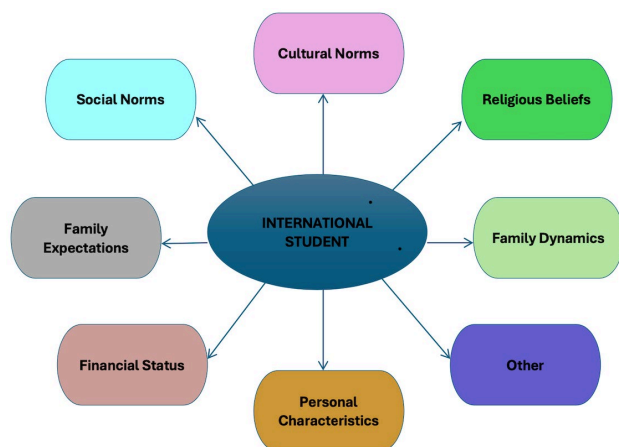


Fig. 1. Factors influencing the education of international students.

IV. CONCLUSION

The educational needs of international students pursuing higher education in Western countries are substantially distinct from those of their domestic peers. These students represent a diversity of cultural backgrounds, religious traditions, financial circumstances, and prior educational experiences. Each of these dimensions, together with the personal and situational factors unique to everyone, exerts an influence on student learning and academic performance. At the same time, the theoretical resources available to educators are rich and well-evidenced: adult learning frameworks, including transformational, experiential, and social learning theories, provide practical guidance for the design and delivery of courses that are responsive to the needs of cosmopolitan student populations.

Educators who teach in value-based disciplines bear a particular responsibility in this regard. Developing a cosmopolitan pedagogical framework—one that integrates relevant learning theories with an informed understanding of the socio-religio-cultural contexts from which their students come—is not merely desirable but essential. Such a framework enables educators to support international students not only in acquiring professional knowledge and skills, but in undertaking the deeper, more demanding work of cultural and ethical integration that practice in a Western professional context requires.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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