

We're here to help.

Cross Cultural Awareness and Communication

INTRODUCTION

Communicating across cultures can be a difficult experience. All successful communication results from one person understanding the meaning and intention of what another person has said. The skills associated with effective and rewarding cross-cultural communication can seem elusive to many people who lack experience of this form of interaction. The information contained in this fact sheet is designed to initiate and/or guide your cross-cultural experiences. The resources and contacts listed are intended as a starting point for further learning.

WHO ARE CALD STUDENTS?

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students are not international students – they are citizens or permanent residents of Australia. Some are voluntary migrants, while most have entered Australia on a Humanitarian Visa after being a refugee.

CALD students come from many countries and represent many cultures and languages. The University of Tasmania currently has students enrolled who come from Chile, Guatemala, Iraq, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and Burundi. These students bring with them a vast array of life experiences and useful perspectives on the world around us. Many have fled violent civil wars, religious or political persecution or natural disasters like famine and drought. Many have experienced the worst that human nature can offer, yet bring enthusiasm and optimism to their study and the life of the University.

WHO ARE HUMANITARIAN ENTRANT STUDENTS?

Humanitarian entrant students are people who have resettled in Australia after being a refugee. They enter Australia as permanent residents and can only access the services available to the general student population.

A refugee is any person who has left their country because of the experience or fear of violence, religious persecution, political unrest or natural disasters, and has no hope of returning to that country. There are currently 32 million refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide. Of these, 8-9 million are from Sudan and 80% are women and children. Australia is one of only 20 nations with an annual refugee resettlement commitment ~ 10-12,000 each year.

In 2006, 500 refugees will be resettling in Tasmania alone, with many adults and teenagers likely to enter UTAS in the next few years. They have all been refugees for extended periods and have experienced or witnessed extreme violence, torture, rape and atrocities during protracted civil wars. They have been subjected to forced dislocation, squalor, malnutrition, disease, limited access to clean water and sanitation and a lack of educational opportunities.

WHAT DO CALD STUDENTS NEED?

- acknowledgement of their experiences;
- acknowledgement of different learning styles;
- acknowledgement of their reality e.g. lack of access to computers, language issues etc.;
- acknowledgement of the value of their experiences to the University community;
- assistance to achieve their potential including skill development, cultural adjustment, language proficiency, computer literacy, information literacy etc.;
- to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of the University; and,
- support in facing feelings of isolation and uncertainty and in dealing with racism.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group. It reflects the norms and values of a given society.

Some of the elements of culture include:

- language;
- dress and appearance;
- food and eating habits;

- music and dance;
- time and time-consciousness;
- interpersonal relationships; and,
- beliefs and attitudes.

Some other definitions that are useful when considering cultural difference include:

- Acculturation – the process of adapting to or adopting a different culture.
- Ethnic – which refers to membership of a group linked by race, nationality, language or a common cultural heritage.
- Race – a socially defined population that is derived from distinguishable physical characteristics.
- Stereotype – the notion that all people from a given group are the same.

Some of the most common cultural differences relate to the use of names – how and why people are named and how they are addressed in certain situations. An example is placing the family name first when addressing someone in many collectivist cultures. Greetings such as handshakes, interaction between men and women, family structures, signs of respect, attitudes to education, and body language, also play central roles in most cultures, and are where most common misunderstandings occur. For example in many African cultures, avoidance of eye contact can indicate respect rather than discomfort or a lack of interest.

In many cultures, it is not usual to ask questions of teachers and service providers. However, when issues are raised, the expectations of both parties will often differ in relation to acceptable outcomes and the level of concern displayed. In fact, many CALD students tend to rely on members of their own community for information about University matters.

WHY IS COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES SO DIFFICULT?

More than 80% of the world's people live in societies that are collectivist in nature. Those living in Western societies live in societies that are individualist in nature. This is a fundamental difference that has the potential to create constant misunderstanding and, therefore, miscommunication.

The comparison provided in the table on the following page is a useful starting point for interpreting those fundamental differences as they arise.

Remembering that we are all human beings driven by the same emotions, instincts and ambitions may also help us to see cultural difference as something that is on the surface and not so threatening.

SOME USEFUL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

The following tips are a starting point for cross-cultural communication. Some of the many useful websites providing variations and more detail are listed in the resources section of this fact sheet.

- Be complete, explicit and pay attention to the other person's response.
- Avoid metaphors, colloquialisms and jargon. Define any jargon that you must use.
- Be alert for different meanings.
- Avoid the over-simplification of terms as it may seem insulting.
- If a word or concept is not understood, re-word your thoughts. Do not repeat it or increase your volume as if the listener has a hearing problem.
- Paraphrase and seek verification of understanding. Ask the listener to confirm information or directions in their own words.

- Consider the most appropriate mode of communication.
- Acknowledge cultural differences without bias and be persistent. When you have difficulty, talk about it together.
- Be sensitive to cultural stands on social issues like gender roles and drug use.
- Do not ask questions that you would not or could not answer yourself.
- Withhold judgment and set your assumptions aside. Study and evaluate cultural generalisations. Understand that even valid generalisations must be carefully considered when applied to individuals.
- Research the cultural background of the person, if possible.
- Take the risk! Always remember that you will make mistakes as you learn.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CALD STUDENTS

Communicating across cultures presents the same problems for CALD students as it does for other people in the University. The tips above are as useful for CALD students as for the broader University community. It is also good to keep the following points in mind:

- If you are having difficulty communicating with academic staff or fellow students, seek help from your faculty Student Adviser or Support and Equity.
- Many people choose not to interact with you because they do not want to offend you.
- We all have the same feelings of apprehension in unfamiliar circumstances.
- If people express a wish to hear your story, be prepared to tell only those parts of it that you are comfortable talking about.

RESOURCES

There are many people and organisations that can help if you are finding communication across cultures difficult, or if you are interested to know more. These include:

- Support and Equity
- The Migrant Resource Centre in your city
- Multicultural Tasmania
- The Refugee Council of Australia

Useful web-based resources include the following recommended sites:

www.utas.edu.au/tl/index.html which provides access to a range of teaching and learning resources including inclusive teaching practice and CALT programs.

www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/supporting/teaching.html for information on the creation of culturally inclusive curricula.

www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/resources/documents/celt_11.pdf for information on teaching international students.

CONTACTS

For more information or assistance, please contact one of the CALD Liaison Officers employed by the University. You can find out how to contact them by contacting Support and Equity on your campus.

CALD Liaison Officers

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