

10 Adjusting to new ways of teaching and learning

The style of teaching and learning can be quite similar, or quite different from what you're used to in your own country. Even if it seems the same on the surface, it's good to read through this chapter to know what to expect when you arrive in class.

The different settings in which classes are taught at colleges and universities

Classroom lectures

Classroom lectures are the traditional setting that most people think of when they think of attending a college or university. This is where the professor/lecturer speaks at length in front of the class, with little if any time for questions from students or discussion. At the larger Australian/UK universities and state colleges of the US and Canada, don't be surprised if some classes/lectures are filled with 500 other students! In this case, the professor/lecturer will speak into a microphone so all can hear. During these classes/lectures, it's your job to take notes (and stay awake). You can read more details about note-taking in Chapter 11.

Discussion groups

In the US, the students who attend the big college/university classes discussed will usually be divided up into smaller discussion groups that meet one to three times a week. These are usually led by Teaching Assistants (TAs) or "tutors" who are graduate students in that subject area. In the UK, Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs) are also often

employed to give lectures, lead laboratory experiments, or hold workshops or discussion groups. Like the name says, discussion groups meet to discuss the ideas that were introduced in the lecture in a more detailed way. It's also a great time for students to ask questions and make sure they've understood difficult concepts.

Seminars

At colleges/universities, many courses are offered on a seminar basis. This is usually a much smaller class than a lecture, and in a more informal setting. The biggest difference between the seminar and the lecture is that the seminar is discussion based, and usually involves up to 40 students led by anyone from a professor/lecturer to a teaching assistant to an instructor. Sometimes the seminar is designed to be more in-depth, assuming an introductory knowledge in the subject area.

In the US and Canada, seminars are usually for upper-classmen (Juniors and Seniors) in their final two years of their undergraduate degrees, or for graduate students. In countries such as the UK or New Zealand, they are offered to all levels of undergraduates.

Tutorials

Tutorials occur mostly in the British, Australian, and New Zealand university systems. They traditionally involve students meeting once a week in groups of about 5–12 students with a professor/lecturer or tutor, writing and defending research papers. Tutorials at Oxford or Cambridge universities in England are often in an even smaller group, sometimes with just one student.

In North America, a tutorial is usually a short lesson on a subject, now often delivered by video. In the UK, video tutorials are also used as a teaching method and the word “tutorial” can refer to a session with your personal tutor (advisor) too. You should normally be able to work out from

the context what the word “tutorial” refers to, but don’t be afraid to ask if you need to.

First-year interest group seminars (FIGS)

In many colleges/universities in the US, First-year interest group seminars (sometimes called “FIGS”) are a great alternative to the huge lectures on offer. A FIG is typically set up like a seminar for smaller groups. They are often 1-credit courses linked to other 1-credit courses in similar disciplines or majors. They help students discover what major they’d like to pursue. Sometimes they’re taught by a trained upper-classman, or by regular professors. They vary a lot from college to college, so be sure to ask how they work exactly at yours.

Workshops

Workshops can take on a variety of forms. They can be short afternoon courses offered free by your college or university’s library on a subject such as “how to use Excel” or the college writing center offering a workshop called “improving your essay-writing skills.” They can also be the main form of instruction, especially in subjects such as creative writing, art, dance, or other creative disciplines. This type of course often focuses on project-based work (writing a piece of fiction or directing a play) and then discussion of each student’s work under the leadership of a professor/lecturer or instructor. In the UK, a “workshop” can be similar to a “seminar,” and there is likely to be a practical element in it.

Online courses

The Internet has changed the way colleges/universities teach and present their material. Some of your courses may have an online element, and use programs such as Blackboard, Moodle, or SharePoint. Wherever you study, it’s a good idea to make sure your Internet connection at home is fast enough

so that you're ready to participate in any online element of your traditional class right away.

Teaching styles in English-speaking countries

The way that your professor/lecturer or other instructor leads the class may be a big surprise to you. There are, of course, the traditional lectures, as mentioned. Those are likely to be quite similar to what you've encountered before in your previous education at home, with the professor/lecturer doing the talking and the students sitting and listening. However, in other forms of class, such as seminars and discussion groups, both students and professors/lecturers speak. The professor/lecturer will still guide the class, but students are expected to ask and answer questions and take part in discussions. You may be expected to know about the subject before turning up to a seminar, for example by consulting the materials on the reading list in your syllabus.

What to call your professor/lecturer, TA, or other instructor

Let's start with the basics of what to call the person teaching you. Teachers in English-speaking countries have a more casual relationship with their students than in many other countries. Although some professors/lecturers will expect you to call them Dr. Jones, others will insist that you call them by their first name. Teaching assistants (TAs) and other instructors will also ask you to use their first name in most cases. This can be strange and uncomfortable for a student. You must remember, however, that if your TA asks you to call her Sarah, for example, and you keep calling her "teacher" or "Miss Smith," she's likely to feel uncomfortable. The title puts a feeling of distance between you, and makes it seem that you're ignoring her request.

Professors/Lecturers in Australia, the UK, and New Zealand are particularly informal. Even old and very senior lecturers usually ask students to address them by their first name. If your professor/lecturer does this, it's fine to do so! If you're worried about being respectful, make sure you address your professors/lecturers by title plus surname when you first meet them (e.g. call Dr. Jane Smith "Dr. Smith") and wait for them to tell you to use their first name. They almost always will.

Individual teaching style

The way a professor/lecturer teaches at colleges/universities in English-speaking countries can vary a lot. Like everywhere else, some professors/lecturers are uninspiring and others are passionate about their subject and never stop talking. In general, however, you'll probably see that professors/lecturers will try to present the main ideas of the course with interesting examples, often from real life, to keep the students' interest. You may find some amusing professors/lecturers who really know their subject. You'll almost always have professors/lecturers who want you to be an active participant in your own learning. It's not about pouring knowledge into your head and you passively accepting it. They'll act more as a guide for you. You'll get more information about the teaching and learning philosophy behind this in Chapter 15.

The style of your professors/lecturers may be very different from what you're used to. This makes some students uncomfortable at first. Try to relax and to see that there's usually a good reason for what they're doing, even if it seems odd or silly at first.

Participation

Because independent thought and critical thinking skills are so highly valued in the Western education systems, your professors/lecturers are going to regularly challenge you to share your thoughts with the class. This can be a moment of high anxiety for many international students. If you've come from

a country like China, for example, where classes are typically completely teacher-led, with little input from students, this can be a big problem at first. It's important to participate as often as possible. You'll sometimes see home students competing to answer questions. As long as this is done respectfully, this is usually seen as a good thing to do. Don't feel you have to wait your turn to contribute, or that you need to be absolutely sure that the answer is right to save face. In fact, you're expected to contribute, so waiting politely may be perceived as negative. Listen carefully to how home students ask and answer questions, so that you can start doing the same. At first you may feel more comfortable asking questions of your professor/lecturer after class, but it's important to learn how to do this in class as well. Don't ask your friends questions while the professor/lecturer is talking—this is considered very rude.

If you don't participate, it can send lots of negative signals to your professor/lecturer, such as:

- you didn't read the material;
- you didn't understand the material;
- you're bored;
- you don't have anything original or interesting to add to the subject;
- you're not a good student in general.

Unlike in many countries, student silence is only expected while the professor/lecturer or other students are talking.

Many tutors understand that this may be difficult for students from certain cultures, but try to participate or ask questions. If you find that you're contributing a lot in class, perhaps because that's encouraged in your culture too, be careful that you don't interrupt others and that all students are able and encouraged to speak.

Group work

You will often be asked to discuss different things you're working on or studying in pairs and groups. If you come

from a gender-segregated country like some of those in the Middle East, you'll have to get used to working closely with the opposite sex in these pairs and groups. Though that can be uncomfortable, few professors/lecturers will allow you to work separately due to the openness of gender relations at colleges/universities in the Western world.

Group work can be particularly stressful for international students as they may be too modest to contribute. It might be a good idea to tell your group that discussion of this kind is new for you. This will make them aware and want to help encourage you to speak.

Home students, or other students from talkative cultures such as South America, can often spend a lot of time talking in your group. You might feel that you don't have any time to give your thoughts or opinions. If you're quiet, they may feel that it's their job to "fill in the silent space." Make sure you speak up in this situation. You can always assign a "group leader" whose job it is to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

Colleges/Universities and liberalism

Most colleges/universities in English-speaking countries are very liberal and political places.

Your professors/lecturers and TAs might present certain issues with a high level of liberal bias. This is frustrating for conservative students, whether they're a home student or an international student. If you feel that your professor/lecturer or TA is being too political, or not presenting both sides of an argument in a fair way, you can of course speak to that person after class to express your views.

liberal (adjective): Someone who has liberal views believes people should have a lot of freedom in deciding how to behave and think.

bias (noun): Bias is a tendency to prefer one person or thing to another, and to favor that person or thing.

Sensitive topics

Remember that in English-speaking countries, people believe in freedom of speech and freedom of information. This means that people are “entitled to their opinion.” That is, they can think and believe what they choose, and should let other people think and believe what they choose. There are some topics, however, that are very sensitive, where people disagree strongly.

When these come up, local students can get very angry, and try to give you information which shows you that your views are wrong, or immoral. Because you are new to the culture, it’s best to listen to what home students have to say, and then speak.

Race

With the slavery past in the United States or other deeply controversial systems such as South Africa’s former Apartheid system, race is a very difficult and sensitive subject throughout the Western world.

Remember that even if you see a white face teaching you, that person could be married to an African-American. Or your East Asian professor/lecturer could be married to someone from Venezuela. There is no place for any racist comment in any classroom discussion. Not only will it upset people because it suggests that some people are better than others, but it will also give your professor/lecturer a negative view of you and your skills.

Religion

Every religion in the world is represented throughout most English-speaking countries. Though Christianity is historically the majority religion, there are Buddhists, Jews,

Muslims, Hindus, and various other groups. There are also an increasing number of agnostics (those who believe in a higher power, but don't know what exactly it is) and atheists (those who believe that there is no God, that there is just man and nature). Trying to push your religious beliefs onto someone else, or talking about your religious beliefs openly is usually highly unpopular with other students. Again, tolerance and a "live and let live" attitude is best.

Politics

When it comes to politics, it's best to listen before speaking, no matter where you're from. In the US especially, it can be a major problem as the country has been bitterly divided by politics in recent decades. Wait and learn from others on this one. If someone asks your opinion, of course, go ahead and speak. But just be aware of how angry some people can get about the subject.

Women's rights

The women's rights movement has been happening in Western culture for over 100 years. Women vote, hold every political office, and are CEOs of major corporations such as Yahoo and General Motors. Some international students come from countries where women still can't drive or own property. You must understand, in that case, that your view of women's rights will be very different from that of most college/university students where you're studying, where this view of women isn't acceptable. There are still big issues to resolve in some English-speaking countries, especially regarding women's safety, reproductive rights (birth control and abortion), and equal pay. But again, listen and learn first, then start talking.

Gay rights

This is an area where there is a huge difference between Western culture and many, many other parts of the world. Be

very careful to learn a lot and share what you know, always trying to keep an open mind. Although the thought of gay marriage, for example, might be unacceptable in many parts of the world, it's being actively argued over and fought for across much of the English-speaking world right now.

Hearing things you don't agree with

During lectures and class discussions, you're likely to hear things you find personally controversial, offensive, or even shocking. There are very few taboo subjects that cannot be discussed in the English-speaking classroom.

A good example of this is gay rights issues. You may be used to never hearing people talk openly about homosexuality in any way in your country. However, in the American classroom it often comes up in courses from history to culture, sociology to law, because many US states have recently made gay marriage legal.

When you're confronted with subjects such as these, you must learn to keep an open mind. Shutting down and saying, "that's unacceptable," or, "it's against my religion," doesn't show a high level of critical thinking skills or tolerance. It also won't help you learn about the subject and how it relates more widely to your course or the society you're studying in as a whole.

Tolerance is a major part of having a successful college/university experience in any English-speaking country. These countries are racially and ethnically diverse and most people have a tolerant attitude towards different religions, lifestyles, and sexual orientations.

taboo (adj): A taboo subject or activity is one that there is a social custom to avoid talking about or doing, because people find it embarrassing or offensive.

tolerance (noun): Tolerance is the quality of allowing other people to say and do what they like, even if you do not agree with or approve of it.