

Clinical Placement Challenges: A Focus on International Students

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The purpose of this presentation is to discuss key challenges educators face in meeting the needs of international students in academic programs. Furthermore, it will provide some recommendations for dealing with these issues. As our universities become more globalized, and as more students that are international enter our campuses, educators are often challenged by their language background, different communication styles, and study skills. Furthermore, these students bring with them different expectations about the learning process and diverse worldviews. They come from a variety of cultures and have very different life experiences. The most obvious challenge is their language background.

Language Issues and World Englishes:

All foreign students entering into our institutions of higher education must pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). This means that they are able to read English at the college level. This does not imply that they can comprehend spoken English equally well. In addition, this does not mean that they can speak English very well.

Many international students have great difficulties in understanding the lectures in class. They cannot comprehend the questions posed by the professors and many seldom volunteer any information. They are silent in class and often do not participate in group discussions. They also may take things out of context leading to frustration and misunderstanding.

Many international students come from English-speaking countries such as Singapore, India and the Philippines. They may speak a variety of English that differ quite a lot from Standard English. The world of Englishes presents many features that create distinct “accents” which may be difficult for the faculty and fellow students to understand. In the clinical contact domain, they lack interview skills and exhibit response patterns that differ from the norms. They may have delayed responses or they even pretend to understand the content for fear of losing face. In addition, they may exhibit nonverbal behaviors that are difficult to interpret since nonverbal communication differs from culture to culture and carry so much meaning.

Nonverbal Communication

International students were brought up in all parts of the world. They have lived with many traditions and rules of conduct. Many of the traditions and rules are nonverbal and are learned through observation. These learned behavioral patterns are difficult to change and they carry special meanings. When these students engage in social interactions, they may use the rules from their home culture to interpret the nonverbal cues. This may create communication breakdown in the learning process. A professor may view the lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect while the student is actually looking down to show respect. Such breakdown in communication occurs very often and leads to misunderstanding that may compromise the teacher-learner relationship. Many international students learn to study through the method of regurgitation and are not used to independent thinking and critical thinking. They differ in the ways of studying.

Study Skills

In general, faculty members expect students to develop critical thinking skills in order to solve clinical problems. Instead of providing students with data and facts, professors may ask students to conduct research and to come up with solutions to the problems. This means that the students are not told what to do,

but are asked to figure out what to do. International students may not be prepared to conduct research on their own since they might not have had the experience of doing research in their home country. They may also struggle to find the important points in their reading assignments and fail to prioritize the information received.

Note taking can also be challenging since they are not familiar with the ways notes are taken, and may miss important points and concepts while trying to take down everything. They also may be shy in asking classmates to share notes or join a study group.

Many international students have not written a paper before they enroll in an US university, which means that they are not prepared to present an outline and go through the entire writing process. They may also take portions of their readings and copy the content as part of their paper not knowing the conventions of writing a paper thus presenting an issue of plagiarism.

Furthermore, they may be intimidated by their professors, and dare not go to their professors during the office hours to seek advice, guidance in clarification. This may create a negative impression on the professor's side. Yet the student may feel a sense of alienation, isolation and even marginalization.

Expectations and Worldviews

Many international students view professors as “parents/mentors”. They expect the professors to tell them what to do. Constructive criticism may be viewed as a form of rejection. Unless the professor takes the initiative to approach the student, he/she is not going to find out how the student is feeling about the course, the content and overall delivery of the subject matter.

Key Questions

Based on the above challenges, the following key questions must be asked:

- How can we contribute to the building of self-esteem of our international students?

- How can we facilitate better communication between student and professor?
- How can we facilitate better communication between student clinician and supervisor?
- How can the goals of learning to communicate well be broadened to communicate for the well-being of individuals?
- How can we enhance the cross-cultural communicative competence of all stakeholders?
- How can we build a bridge between student clinician and clients?
- How can we facilitate communication among students?

Recommendations

The following recommendations may be helpful in improving the quality of teaching and learning for our international students:

- Understand the challenges we face as faculty;
- Be a life-long learner by increasing our cross-cultural communication competence;
- Establish a global network to enhance the learning of our students and find mentors for these students globally;
- Change and modify our teaching methodology to facilitate learning of our international students;
- Understand the challenges beyond phonology, semantics and pragmatics by relating to cognitive styles, cultural patterns and differences;
- Understand the challenges beyond translation during clinical encounters;
- Understand the importance of clinical efficacy; and finally
- Be a mentor.