Developing Cultural Competence for International Teaching Assistants

OLIT 537 - Culture & Global e-Learning
University of New Mexico

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Introduction

The University of New Mexico (UNM) frequently receives international teaching assistants (ITAs) from around the world who are responsible for teaching a variety of subjects. Currently, UNM provides training for teaching assistants (TAs) through the Teaching Assistant Resource Center (TARC). Their offerings include, but are not limited to: (1) A one-credit graduate course, Graduate Teaching I (OILS 583), as an introduction to post-secondary classroom teaching, (2) A special non-credit workshop series during each semester that addresses issues particular to the TA community, (3) Participation by TARC staff members in the selection process for the Susan Deese-Roberts Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award each year, and (4) Individual consultations regarding teaching responsibilities and methods.

OILS 583 is offered to all TAs to prepare them for their positions at UNM. In order to address the special needs of ITAs, a section of OILS 583 is offered exclusively to ITAs. It provides them training in their duties as well as culturally relevant knowledge. This special section was designed to empower ITAs so that their interactions with students would be positive and reduce the chances of cultural missteps.

Due to lackluster enrollment by ITAs in OILS 583, this group proposes the development of self-directed, on-demand e-Learning modules that can be used independently and/or as a supplement for both the general and cultural training that they would have received in OILS 583.

Involved Parties

The Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), formally known as the Office for Support of Effective Teaching (OSET), focuses on engaging and empowering UNM instructors in the development of effective, diverse learning opportunities to enhance the success of diverse
learners. CTE hopes to shape a campus culture that holds teaching in such high regard that all classes are ultimately taught by thoughtful and proficient instructors constantly striving to improve their teaching.

**Mentor** - Aeron Haynie, Director, Center for Teaching Excellence

Dr. Haynie’s 20 years of teaching and leadership experience includes serving as the director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, directing the statewide Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars Program, and previous service as the chair of the English department at UW-Green Bay.

**Coordinator** - Felipe Amaral, Multimedia Assistant and Webmaster, Graduate Studies and CTE

Felipe Amaral supports Graduate Studies and the CTE in upgrading and regularly updating their websites and in producing learning objects and web-based interactive instructional materials to provide synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. He will use this expertise and his proximity to CTE to act as the project coordinator.

**Program Design**

The primary delivery method will be Articulate Studio ‘13 Pro, an award-winning rapid e-Learning authoring suite comprised of four different programs: (1) Presenter will be used to create, narrate, and annotate e-Learning content in PowerPoint slides, which will then turn them into a compelling course. The final output presentation allows designers to quickly distribute interactive and persuasive materials while conveying information in the universally accepted Flash format. The basic structure of the self-directed e-Learning modules will be created using this tool, whose features include: multi-level navigation and branching, embedded live web pages and other objects, and multiple publishing options, including Flash, HTML5, and Mobile.
(2) Engage will be used to create lean-forward experiences that involve participants and produce interactions that turn passive viewers into active learners. For the e-Learning modules, some of the interactions we will use include: accordion (to review related items or steps in a process, one at a time), glossary (to make it easy for learners to find definitions to important words, terms, and phrases), media panel (to let learners explore a series of related photos, videos, Flash files, or screenshots), labeled graphic (to highlight key details on a photo, image, screenshot, or other graphics), and process (to make it easy for learners to walk-through a process, workflow, procedure, or related items). (3) Quizmaker will be used to generate professional, custom-made quizzes and assessments to check learners’ progress and provide proof of completion when necessary. The software offers a streamlined interface and two development modes (form-based editing and free form editing). Some of its advanced features include: grouping and randomizing question pools, inclusion of images, Flash, and audio, branching that leads quiz takers to different slides depending on how they answer each question, customizable feedback layers, as well as tracking and reporting options. (4) Replay will be used to insert full-motion video and screencasts to the e-Learning modules, while converting almost any video into the popular .FLV Flash video format. Furthermore, it has advanced video editing features.

**Terminal Objectives**

As a result of this instruction, learners will: (1) Describe characteristics of learner-centered teaching and adult learning, creating a foundation for confident and skilled performance as a graduate ITA, (2) Identify university policies and resources to guide teaching tasks and responsibilities, (3) Devise strategies for effectively managing an undergraduate classroom, and (4) Practice effective teaching methods and techniques for a multicultural class in different situations and settings.
Course Outline

The course is outlined below, but note that some of the subtopics in each module may overlap at times. It will consist of five modules: (1) Introduction to Teaching covers student learning styles and characteristics. This module provides learners with a starting point and provides a foundation for succeeding modules. (2) Policies and Resources focuses on policies and resources available to ITAs at UNM. FERPA is discussed, what contexts information is appropriate to share, academic integrity policies, and a presentation of relevant resources. (3) Classroom Management covers syllabus drafting, creating a proper learning environment, weekly preparation, difficult students, and grade disputes. (4) Teaching Methods and Strategies presents an overview of teaching methods, strategies, and tips on student learning styles and assessment. (5) Culture in the Classroom is the primary focal point of this project. The rationale for the inclusion and significance of this module is based on arguments such as, “...of the traditional three basic learning needs for international teaching assistants (ITAs)—language, teaching, and culture—culture is the least developed” (Gorsuch, 2012).

Module 5 - Culture in the Classroom

As the primary focus of this project, Module 5 discusses significant cultural factors that should be addressed by ITAs: Cultural Context of American Higher Education, Overcoming Language Barriers, Teacher-Student Relationship, and the Cultural Context of New Mexico. After completing this module, ITAs should have a better understanding of the culture surrounding American higher education and how to effectively aid their students in the learning process.
Cultural Context of American Higher Education

This section of the module discusses the Cultural Context of American Higher Education. We will focus on US classroom culture and how it may differ from the culture that the ITAs are used to. We want to make sure that ITAs are made aware that US classroom culture could be, and probably is, very different from what they are used to. Our goal is to prepare the ITAs for any cultural differences that they may encounter while teaching.

The first section discusses the makeup of an average university classroom. It is important to keep in mind that most classrooms consist of students of all ages, genders, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. ITAs should be ready to encounter a diverse group of people in any classroom.

The next section discusses group work. Most courses tend to encourage, and even require, some sort of group work, activity, or project. In some cultures, multiple students working together on an assignment could be misconstrued as cheating or plagiarism. However, it is common behavior in the US and, as long as it is approved by the professor, should not be considered as cheating.

Along with group work, student participation within the classroom is very important. In fact, some courses are graded partially based on student attendance and participation. Professors encourage their students to engage themselves in classroom discussions and to voice their thoughts and opinions. Friendly debate among students is allowed, as long as neither side oversteps confrontational boundaries. It is important for students to be allowed to express themselves and to be able to hear others’ opinions on discussion topics. Additionally, online courses often require students to interact with each other via discussion boards and other Web 2.0 tools.
Finally, we discuss the implementation of office hours. Students expect both faculty and TAs to hold office hours, which is a time in which a student can have a one-on-one meeting with the professor to discuss any problems or questions. The specific hours and location are usually included in the syllabus or mentioned during the first day of classes.

**Overcoming Language Barriers**

Each language has a unique inventory of vowel and consonant sounds that occur in combinations to make syllables and words. Attention to the exact features of the pronunciation of the individual sounds in American English and how these differ from other language sounds will put ITAs in a better position to understand and pronounce American English proficiently. In order to help ITAs, we propose using the vowel chart ([Appendix 1](#)) to make it possible to learn new sounds physically, as opposed to relying on the ear, which may not be able to hear unfamiliar sounds.

Each point on the chart is a position in the mouth where the tongue moves to make a different vowel sound. In the same way, each symbol and key word on the chart represent a position in the mouth to which the tongue moves to form a vowel. By keeping the tongue unmoved and relaxed in the middle of the mouth, ITAs can let out some voiced air, and then get the sound "uh" shown in the middle of the vowel chart with the "schwa" symbol, an upside-down, backwards "e." This is a very important sound for the American accent, as it is the most common vowel sound heard in American English. In addition to how the tongue moves, it is also important to notice how the lips and jaw shape vowel sounds. ITAs can practice producing these sounds by looking at a mirror and observing how the mouth and tongue move.
Another important aspect to consider is word stress. As a general rule, every English word spoken in isolation contains one major syllable, which is stressed. A stressed syllable is usually louder, and its vowel is longer and higher pitched than the vowel of an unstressed syllable. Often, the vowel of an unstressed syllable is shortened or weakened to the neutral schwa /ə/ vowel. The words shown in Appendix 2 are commonly occurring words in an academic context that non-native speakers may accent incorrectly. They are grouped according to the syllable that receives the strongest stress. These are all important words, which ITAs should practice pronouncing until they are confident that a native speaker would not misunderstand.

Furthermore, it is very important to be aware of the rhythm of the English language, that is, the pattern of how words are stressed or unstressed. The rhythm of English depends upon the contrast (or alternation) between strong and weak syllables (or beats). If ITAs say every syllable of every word equally, the rhythm will sound “choppy” to a native speaker. If there is not any special stress on any of the words or syllables, the speech will sound run together and slurred to a native speaker. In either case, it will be very hard for someone to understand and listeners (usually students) will probably start to “tune out.”

Good rhythm in English involves stressing content words, which carry meaning (i.e. nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc.), and reducing function words that primarily serve a grammatical purpose (i.e. prepositions, articles, conjunctions, etc.). In general, the vowels in function words are reduced to schwa /ə/. By understanding the rhythm of the English language, ITAs can help listeners process their message by breaking their utterances into message units. A message unit is a string of words that belong together as one unit in the mind of the speaker. Message units are often separated from each other by a brief pause. Each message unit has its own intonation and usually one primary stress.
Additionally, when speaking any language, a person makes the voice rise and fall in pitch. Except in cases of special emphasis or contrast, an English clause or sentence has the major pitch change on the last major content word. This is entirely appropriate, considering that it is also a pattern in English for the most important or new information to be placed at or near the end of a sentence. The final position is called the “focal” or highlighted position. In this position, the major pitch change of the sentence draws attention to this highlighted position. In statements or information questions (who, what, where, when, why), the pitch typically rises and then falls on the last major content word or phrase. In yes/no questions, the pitch of the voice tends to be high and/or to rise on the last major content word. In the “continuation” intonational pattern, the voice is high or rises on all the items other than the last one to show more information is coming. Falling intonation generally indicates finality, whereas rising or high intonation generally indicates non-finality.

Finally, it is useful for ITAs to be aware of some key expressions used in the university setting. See Appendix 3 for a list of some of these expressions.

**Teacher-Student Relationship**

This section of the e-Learning module discusses the Teacher-Student Relationship. It is arguably considered the keystone to classroom management. Without a proper relationship between the two, the classroom might be difficult to manage. Most classes have a set list of policies and procedures that each student is automatically assumed to follow. This can include a code of ethics, a list of policies and procedures, or an honesty clause included in the syllabus. These strict rules against plagiarism and cheating are usually, if not always, university-wide. There are rules that both teachers and students must follow. Professionalism is the key to being a great ITA.
This section also discusses the importance of understanding what is considered appropriate behavior in a university classroom setting. ITAs must manage their classroom in a manner that enhances student learning, and provides a non-threatening environment. ITAs should employ the following management tools in an effort to facilitate a safe classroom environment: (1) ITAs should brief their students on this rule in the first class section, (2) Universities should not tolerate sexual harassment, which includes: (A) Sexist remarks or behavior, (B) ITAs promising rewards for sexual activity, (3) Unique teacher/student relationships can cause issues for the university. For example, ITAs should be aware of accepting gifts from students as it could be inappropriate, (4) ITAs should maintain a professional relationship with their students.

In addition to providing a safe classroom environment, ITAs must seek to create positive learning experiences. Achieving this goal can be accomplished through implementation of the following strategies: (1) Good communication: use different modes such as spoken or visual in order to reach students who learn in different ways; non-verbal cues are important modes, promote a positive classroom environment, technology can make communication more convenient, (2) Purpose and guidance: Using feedback effectively to guide students' thinking, and extending students' prior knowledge, (3) Effective lecture: Appraise how materials will be presented in the classroom, (4) Staff should show their pleasure and enjoyment of students: Focus on improving relationships with students, while enhancing the relationships among other learners, (5) ITAs should interact in a responsive and respectful manner. Make an effort to get to know your learners, and (6) Teachers should offer help to students: Answer questions in a timely manner, offering support that matches the learners’ needs in achieving academic success.
Cultural Context of New Mexico

In this section, we explore significant cultural factors to consider when ITAs interact with native New Mexican students and hope to broaden their understanding of this unique cultural setting.

The first part discusses the need to consider cultural diversity in New Mexico. An overview is presented of census demographics and statistics for New Mexico, highlighting the various percentages of ethnic and racial populations throughout the state. This signals ITAs to be aware of the potential to meet students from various origins, which should allow them to be cognizant of the diversity that they are likely to encounter within the classroom.

The second part discusses the prevalence of poverty and is presented via graphs to emphasize the significance of poverty in New Mexico so that ITAs do not overestimate monetary access by students. Elaborating on limitations such as access to technology, broadband Internet, and transportation are presented to the ITA. This is particularly important if the ITA comes from affluent origins.

The third section consists of a psychological personality inventory profile of New Mexico and is presented to provide general perspective on the attitudes of the average New Mexican. The selected study spans 13 years of research and encompasses the entirety of the United States (Rentfrow, 2013). Map images are shown detailing the personality types by the following characteristics: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Kluger & Wilson, 2013). Each characteristic is defined, and general assumptions based on the statistics are presented to the ITA. For example, because New Mexicans exhibit a high Openness score, ITAs can expect that new learning experiences will be well-received. At the end of the
module, ITAs are reminded that while statistical analysis of responses is useful, it is not a definitive way to create assumptions in every interaction.

The fourth section discusses the availability of Legislative Lottery Scholarships to New Mexican recent high school graduates. The overview presents the process, implementation, and availability of the scholarships to provide a greater understanding of the system. The inclusion of this topic sets up the expectation that native New Mexicans will significantly populate the student body as the scholarship provides immediate and affordable access to higher education in New Mexico.

Lastly, the fifth section provides direct perspective into the psychology of young adults who are native New Mexicans by the presentation of anecdotes from interviews conducted through news outlets. A brief overview of quotations from young adults in Albuquerque will help paint a picture of the attitudes of this important demographic. Their responses are significant as they are the most likely to be students ITAs would encounter in their work.

Program Evaluation

The following section is condensed and modeled after principles standardized by published subject-matter experts (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). The evaluation shall quantify the effectiveness of the training module implemented by the CTE. The Key Questions are: (1) What value do current and new ITAs place on the training? (2) To what extent and in what ways does the training empower new and current ITAs in their duties?

A summative evaluation shall be implemented to determine whether the program meets the needs of the stakeholders. Feedback will be elicited at the conclusion of the training modules in the form of post-module surveys and interviews with ITAs. Focusing on the emphasis of learner
satisfaction, knowledge and skills, and job performance dictates that this evaluation shall follow the Training Effectiveness Evaluation System (Swanson & Sleezer, 1987).

Utilization of the Mixed Methods Design (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009) will allow the evaluation to integrate and analyze qualitative and quantitative data. Summarization of quantitative data will allow numerical values to be attributed to the cognitive and emotional states and responses of participants. Standardization through the use of a 5-point Likert scale will allow participants to respond quickly without having to gauge minute levels of emotion towards questions. Qualitative data will be gathered with open comments on each question and will allow for elaboration on thoughts and feelings where pre-compiled survey questions do not suffice or are lacking. Anonymous collection will be implemented to elicit true responses without fear of retribution and analysis will be achieved through the usage of Surveymonkey (Appendix 5). Interviews will follow at the end of the ITAs’ first semester with survey questions being used as a template. Interviewers will use probing questions to elicit qualitative feedback. Upon completion of the analysis, findings will be made available to Dr. Haynie in order to determine whether development and implementation of the training module shall continue, and what changes, if any, should be made.

Implications

The main goal of this course is to provide ITAs with the knowledge to succeed in their interactions with American students in the classroom. We hope that providing ITAs with the course outlined above better prepares them to teach students in an American classroom setting. It is the goal of the CTE to provide UNM with the best teachers possible, including teaching assistants, and that is precisely why this course is offered.
References


Bloustein, Edward J. (1979) President, Rutgers University, Memorandum: The Issue of Sexual Harassment.


### Appendix 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress on 1st Syllable</th>
<th>Stress on 2nd Syllable</th>
<th>Stress on 3rd Syllable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrate</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Impossible</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>Hypothetical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversy</td>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Controversial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asking questions to students</th>
<th>Responding to Student Answers</th>
<th>Admitting responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● How did you start?</td>
<td>● Okay, yes, that’s right,</td>
<td>● Maybe I didn’t express</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>excellent, perfect, nice</td>
<td>the question clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>job</td>
<td>Let me try again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● So what do you do with</td>
<td>● Okay, that’s part of it, now can</td>
<td>● I guess I didn’t cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the constant?</td>
<td>anyone else help us out from</td>
<td>that material well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know?</td>
<td>this point?</td>
<td>enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Doesn’t this belong</td>
<td>● Let’s go back. You were doing</td>
<td>● I think I might have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhere else?</td>
<td>fine until you got right here.</td>
<td>confused you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Then you missed a step in the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>calculation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Close. Can you try again?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● I understand what you’re saying,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but that’s not what’s needed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>here. Think about the formula</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I gave you a few minutes ago.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4

Glossary

ARC - Accessibility Resource Center

CAPS - Center for Academic Program Support

CTE - Center for Teaching Excellence

FERPA - The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

IDEA - Individual with Disabilities Education Act

ITA - International Teaching Assistant

ITARC - International Teaching Assistant Resource Center

OSET - Office for Support of Effective Teaching

TA - Teaching Assistant

TARC - Teaching Assistant Resource Center

TEC - Teaching Enhancement Committee

UNM - University of New Mexico
Appendix 5


1. As a result of Module 1, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Learning-Centered Teaching.
2. As a result of Module 1, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Active Learning.
3. As a result of Module 1, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Learning Styles.
4. As a result of Module 1, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Student Characteristics.
5. Overall, the information covered by Module 1 will be useful for my TA position.
6. Overall, the pace of Module 1 was appropriate with my learning style.
7. As a result of Module 2, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of FERPA.
8. As a result of Module 2, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Academic Integrity.
9. As a result of Module 2, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of LoboWeb.
10. As a result of Module 2, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Resources for TAs at UNM.
11. Overall, the information covered by Module 2 will be useful for my TA position.
12. Overall, the pace of Module 2 was appropriate with my learning style.
13. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Preparing a Syllabus.
14. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of the First Day of Class.
15. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Weekly Class Preparation.
16. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Mid-Semester Strategies.
17. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Difficult Students.
18. As a result of Module 3, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Grade Disputes.
19. Overall, the information covered by Module 3 will be useful for my TA position.
20. Overall, the pace of Module 3 was appropriate with my learning style.
21. As a result of Module 4, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Active Learning.

22. As a result of Module 4, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of the Types of Learning Styles and Relevant Tips.

23. As a result of Module 4, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Types of Assessments.

24. As a result of Module 4, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Culture in the Classroom.

25. Overall, the information covered by Module 4 will be useful for my TA position.

26. Overall, the pace of Module 4 was appropriate with my learning style.

27. As a result of Module 5, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of the Cultural Context of American Higher Education.

28. As a result of Module 5, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of Language Barriers.

29. As a result of Module 5, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of the Teacher-Student Relationship.

30. As a result of Module 5, I feel that I have adequate comprehension of the Cultural Context of New Mexico.

31. Overall, the information covered by Module 5 will be useful for my TA position.

32. Overall, the pace of Module 5 was appropriate with my learning style.

33. Overall, I would recommend this training program to other ITAs.