

AALTO IS

MULTICULTURAL

How to benefit from it in teaching?

Aalto University is a multicultural community of almost **100 nationalities** – how could we all benefit from this diversity **more** in teaching situations?

We don't need to change our personality and culture, but by creating a dialogue between cultures everyone learns new perspectives and ways of doing things. Intercultural competence is a much needed skill in the global labor market and best trained during the studies.

ayy

A!
Aalto-yliopisto

To understand other cultures it's essential to understand your own. In the Finnish academic environment the flat and informal hierarchies, respecting the privacy and personal space of others, concentrating on tasks rather than relationships are examples of behavior that many foreign students find new. It's a good idea to explain Finnish cultural traits rather than assume foreign students know them.

In Aalto, teachers and students have to find new ways to get the most out of the increasing diversity.

International students dive not only into a new culture but also into a new academic culture. Different learning practices, such as using new technical devices, emphasizing critical and applied thinking instead of learning by heart and demanding independence in study planning can cause a learning shock. Stress, lack of direction and feelings of alienation are symptoms of a learning shock. **It is recommendable to communicate clearly your pedagogical views, practices, goals and give thorough instructions for assignments.**

Cultures communicate and relate to authorities in different ways. In high-context cultures direct confrontation is avoided and much of the message is written between the lines. Hierarchies and social norms play a key role in the behavioral code, for example between teacher and student. Direct confrontation in these cultures can mean a lack of respect and make a person lose face. In low-context cultures, like Finland, communication is more direct, precise, and based on clear intentions. Hierarchy is flat and often opinions are taken into account regardless of social status. **Take this into account in your teaching – provide students with various feedback channels, enable different forms of interaction in your classes and encourage students to approach you.**

Ensure there are different means of giving feedback



Finnish students learn Finnish academic standards during their Bachelor degree. International master degree students are used to various academic practices in their home universities and many struggle in the beginning of their studies in Aalto. One example is dealing with new referencing practices. Students should not need to learn from the mistakes of others, nor should the Finnish students be responsible for teaching academic practices to international students. Provide students guidance to find sources and support for their academic writing skills. **The curricula of master degrees should include enough guidance on academic writing.**

All students appreciate varied and inspiring lecturing. The academic culture in some countries is marked by a constant student-teacher and student-student interaction and the use of versatile speech patterns and body language. International students mentioned that they experienced a lack of these elements in several courses which causes loss of interest and a smaller retention rate.

By using different pedagogical methods you can increase the interest and retention rates in your groups. For example student centered, collaborative and blended learning are ways to diversify your teaching and increase engagement with students. There are other simple and interesting options to increase interaction in the lectures:

- Try small group discussions
- Give a shot to project based learning
- Encourage group working and questions
- Use mobile interaction platforms like Presemo and Kahoot
- Create an open atmosphere by sharing something of your person as well

Encourage ice-breaking within the group



**Design the formation
of the
multicultural groups
so that there is
fruitful diversity**

Multiculturality and multidisciplinary are among the success factors of any innovative or high performing team since they provide the team with a vast variety of perspectives, ideas and working methods. In multicultural teams problems related to communication, different goals and working practices may prevent the team from sharing culturally divergent knowledge and may lead to conflicts.

Some cultures, like the Finnish one, are task-oriented, whereas some cultures, like the Chinese, are relationship-oriented. This means that a Finnish person is likely to go directly into the task at hand without giving much attention to the group's working atmosphere and relationships. Some Chinese students on the other hand would rather get to know the people they are working with to plan and work on the task together. Multicultural teams can have better results than monocultural teams if managed well, and here the teacher is in the key role. You can help a multicultural team to succeed by:

- **Designing the formation of the multicultural groups (diversity in the group)**
- **Encouraging ice-breaking within the team. (task-oriented vs. relationship-oriented cultures)**
- **Making the groups to formulate rules of engagement (setting a schedule, goals, means of communication, lingua franca, feedback, division of work, solving problems)**
- **Making teams assign a leader or leaders within the team to assignments**
- **Ensuring different means of giving feedback (peer evaluation forms, anonymous feedback, mid-course feedback)**

These means have been tested in multicultural courses and have led to enhanced results, better overall grades and a reduction of negative student feedback.

Multiculturality is a resource we should benefit from in the classroom to create skills for the labour market.

The majority of international degree students would like to stay in Finland to work or to study further. However, international graduates face several problems when trying to find their place in the Finnish job market – insufficient language skills, lack of networks and contacts, prejudices of the employers. According to TEK's statistics 65% of the Finnish graduates are employed at the time of their graduation. The percentage for international graduates is 25. According to the International Student Barometer Aalto University is far behind the global average in the satisfaction of the international students in terms of career advice they get from the academic staff and the work experience during studies. International students are interested in their future job prospects in Finland and the academic staff is in the key position to help their integration into the society and give them inspiration for the future. As a teacher you could foster integration by the following means:

- **Multicultural groups in classes might give the students an opportunity to create social networks also outside classes and help them integrate. Social networks will provide students with connections to the job market and cultural and language skills necessary for finding a job in Finland.**
- **Don't hesitate to use your networks in companies and your knowledge of the Finnish working culture and job market as part of your teaching. Guest lectures, company visits, internship and thesis placement opportunities interest international students and also show to business life the potential of our international graduates.**

Integration does not always happen automatically, we have to **set the environment to make it happen.**

Conclusions:

Diversity in Aalto and in Finland has increased and will continue to increase. We have to find new ways to maximize the benefits of this cultural diversity.



Multicultural groups lead to great innovations and learning experiences but require new kinds of teaching skills and strategies to encourage interaction.



Multicultural learning environment fosters all students' intercultural competence, which is needed in the global job market.



Integration does not always happen automatically - everyone at the university can facilitate the integration of foreign talents into the Finnish society.



A!
Aalto-yliopisto

Check also the video *Aalto is Multicultural* with student and teacher interviews on developing teaching of multicultural groups @ayy.fi/multicultural-aalto

Sources and further reading:

- Center for Research on Learning and Teaching: Inclusive Teaching Framework and Strategies. University of Michigan. http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Inclusive%20Teaching%20Strategies.pdf
- European Students' Union (2012): Student Centered Learning - SCL Toolkit. 2012. <http://www.esu-online.org/pageassets/projects/projectarchive/100814-SCL.pdf>
- Griffiths, D.S. et al (2004): Learning Shock – The Trauma of Return to Formal Learning. Tanaka Business School Discussion Papers: TBS/DP04/31. London, Tanaka Business School. <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/pls/portallive/docs/1/40419.PDF>.
- Nishimura, Shoji; Nevgi, Anne & Tella, Seppo (2008): Communication Style and Cultural Features in High/Low Context Communication Cultures: A Case Study of Finland, Japan and India. <http://www.helsinki.fi/~tella/nishimuranevgitella299.pdf>
- Popov, Vitali et al.(2012): Multicultural student group work in higher education. An explorative case study on challenges as perceived by students. International Journal of Intercultural Relations 36 (2012) 302– 317.
- Tekniikan Akateemiset (2015): Vastavalmistuneiden palautekysely, 2014 valmistuneiden tulokset. <https://www.tek.fi/tutkimus/vastavalmistuneiden-kysely>
- Torkkeli, Lasse (2014): Monikulttuurisen ryhmädynamiikan kehittäminen osana maisteriopintoja. Lappeenranta University of Technology. Peda-Forum 2014. http://www.lut.fi/documents/10633/346185/TS2_Torkkeli_slides.pdf/0e2ba579-2a37-45fc-8204-12b7971eb98f

Production team:

Milla Ovaska, Specialist, International Affairs, Aalto University Student Union

Milja Asikainen, Member of the Board, Aalto University Student Union

Carlos Mendoza, Teacher in Intercultural Communication, Aalto University

Video made by: Ville Niemi, Viiksimasteri