

“Effective Techniques for Teaching About Other Cultures and Legal Systems”

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This paper essentially examines effective techniques for teaching about other cultures and legal systems. One of the challenges in teaching especially about other cultures and legal systems is to cater to the various groups within the class as well as to each individual student. There may be various nationalities in the class who may have different learning abilities and experience. In addition, there may be language barriers for some students which a professor needs to be aware of. Understanding these individual differences can help a professor design effective teaching techniques in order to maximize the students’ learning experience about other cultures and legal systems. Below, the writer discusses some of such effective teaching techniques.

1. Look at oneself first

Before teaching any class about other culture or legal systems, a professor has to look at himself/herself first to see what he/she is qualified to teach about such subject matter. It is not only knowledge about such subject matter that one needs to possess, but also experience in that area. For example, it is fruitless to have a professor to teach about a culture or legal system which he/she has never been in or had never experience. In order to give a fully enriching learning experience to the students, provide a deep understanding and be able to answer all of the students’ questions, one would need to examine oneself to see whether one is qualified with the proper knowledge and experience for such task.

2. Know your students

It is important to know the target audience and find out as much as possible about each of the students’ background, culture and legal system. If a professor has such knowledge, he/she can help convey information more effectively by giving comparison similar to those in the student’s culture or legal system, or by presenting information that can be easily understood despite the difference in background/culture.

Understanding different cultures and background gives insight on how to communicate effectively with the student. Having knowledge about a student's culture not only helps convey information better, but may also help prevent misunderstanding that may lead to a student feeling offended. For example, in certain cultures, asking the age of someone or even a friendly tap on the shoulder may be seen as offensive.

Every student is unique. Just because two students are from the same country doesn't necessarily mean that they share the same values and beliefs. Their values may differ due to the fact that they may be of different gender, age, religion, socio-economic stats etc... As such it is crucial not to stereotype any student based on their country of origin or race. They may look Chinese and speak mandarin, when they actually are not from China but could be from Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam or Thailand. These misunderstandings may be seen as a disrespectful and cause serious offence.

3. Sharing knowledge about other cultures and legal systems

Sharing knowledge of different cultures and legal system with the class is a teaching technique that not only provides an enriching experience for the students but also makes the class more interesting. In the writer's experience, it has proven to help breakdown barriers with certain students and increased their class participation by giving them an opportunity to contribute knowledge about their culture and legal system.

4. Encourage outdoor learning experiences

Learning doesn't have to be in the class room. A great way for students to learn about other culture and legal system is to attend cultural shows, festivals, courts, prisons etc. Professors may encourage students to undertake such outdoor activities themselves or organize class outings to such events/places. However, this method only works in the event that the student is studying other cultures and legal system in a foreign country.

5. Use video, visual examples and practical demonstrations

Certain aspects of a culture or certain legal subject matter may be taught more effectively by using video, visual examples or practical demonstrations. For example,

in Thai culture, greeting an elderly is accompanied with the “wai” (which consists of putting the hands together and slightly bending the knees). As words may not fully explain the action, a video or practical demonstration would be the best way to illustrate such action.

Visual examples are also very useful in helping explaining certain aspects of a legal system. For example, in a particular country, there may be different types of title deeds (like old title systems and new title systems). The different characteristics in the title systems can be explained by words, but a visual example of the different title deeds would help promote comprehension and deepen understanding on the subject matter.

As for court proceedings, they would differ from country to country. In the writer’s opinion, words by themselves cannot fully explain court proceedings. Having a video of court proceedings or practical demonstration would enhance the students’ understanding of such subject matter.

It goes without saying that it is easier for students to remember what they see as opposed to what they read. As a result, from the writer’s experience, the writer tries to use videos, visual examples and practical demonstrations as much as possible when there is an opportunity.

6. Proactive learning

One of the most effective technique that the writer found when teaching students about any subject matter (whether it be other culture or legal system) is to have the students read their course material before coming to class. Then the class can be a discussion where the student can share their understanding, views and ask further questions. At the same time, the professor can test the student on what they have read and get them to reflect on what they have learnt. The writer believes that with this method the student is applying knowledge that they have learnt and can better understand its usefulness, instead of being spoon-fed with huge amounts of information. Also this technique allows students to practice their verbal and analytical skills. However, the drawback with this method is that students who do not do their readings before class, do not benefit from it.

7. Stay back after class

Some students are sometimes too shy to ask questions during class. As a result, it may be helpful to stay back after class to help answer questions. This method can also give the professor an opportunity to find out more about the students and present himself/herself as friendly and approachable.

8. Group discussions

Having group discussion is also an effective learning avenue. This encourages students to share their legal knowledge and culture with each other in an informal and possibly more comfortable setting. Students may share knowledge in group discussions which they may not share during class discussion. This method also helps students know the other students in the class where they may not have otherwise had the chance to know.

9. Encourage questions in class

At the beginning of the class, the professor should inform his/her students that they can ask questions during class or after class. Asking questions allows students to clarify their understanding. Secondly, other students can also benefit from the questions asked. At the end of the class, the professor can also ask questions to the students, which can serve the purpose of summarizing the subject matter that he/she had just taught. The questions asked by the professor do not have to be addressed to any specific students, but questions to anyone who wishes to answer. Students from certain culture may not like having questions asked directly to them, because they may feel embarrassed in front of the class if they cannot answer it.

10. Presentation style

The presentation style of the professor can also be considered as a teaching technique. A humorous and lively presentation style would not doubt make the class more interesting to students, thereby leading them to pay more attention.

Conclusion

Other cultures and legal systems are hard to teach simply by using words. As such, a professor would need to rely on multi-sensory teaching techniques (as exemplified in

this paper) to communicate more effectively and help student gain a better understanding of the subject matter. These techniques involve having students listen to lectures, discuss ideas, do role-play, visualize examples and perform demonstration. As shown in this paper, such techniques would go a long way to promote comprehension of students, deepen their understanding as well as produce more effective learning.