

TEACHING TIPS:

Teaching International Students in Online or Hybrid Contexts

These teaching tips were developed primarily for international students who speak English as a second or additional language and are learning online or in a hybrid or flipped classroom setting during the COVID-19 crisis, but they would also apply to a number of other teaching situations and student populations.

10 GENERAL TIPS

- 1. Anticipate that your international students may not be able to attend on-campus or synchronous lectures**
International students, both newly admitted and continuing, are less likely to be able to join class sessions in person or synchronously than domestic students. Keep this in mind as you plan your course, and also make sure that students understand exactly how to access your online lecture recordings and other course materials/assignments, using screenshots for clarity. Devise and communicate a back-up plan if students have issues with accessing course material or with connectivity, for example a “What to do if…” area on Blackboard. It’s also a good idea to find out who your students are—and where they are—as you begin the new semester. Note that time zone differences could also affect team projects. International students may need to log on via GW’s [virtual private network](#) (VPN).
- 2. Record a welcome message and establish clear expectations**
A recorded video message sent before classes begin will help build community and socialize students into the course. The message could include: a personal introduction to you, the program/department, and the course; an explanation of your rationale for the way the course is organized and what you hope to achieve; clear guidance on how/when/where you will communicate important course information to students; and a clear set of expectations for students in the class. Consider using VoiceThread for your self-introduction and having students add video comments with their own self introductions. You can also record an interactive “talk through” of your syllabus and show students where they can access key course materials on Blackboard.
- 3. Set clear plans and deliver course content in multiple modalities**
International students benefit not only from clear guidelines at the beginning of the semester but also from an organized structure throughout the course. In addition to a course outline on Blackboard, with topics, materials, assignments, and deadlines (with [timezone](#) specified) clearly listed, it’s a good idea to

introduce each class session with an agenda to help students understand and manage the learning goals for that session and to end each session by outlining upcoming assignments and plans. Presenting information in multiple modalities (e.g., oral explanations, recorded video lectures and explanations, written instructions) and using captioning when possible will provide multiple inputs that support student learning. This also allows international students to revisit course material as many times as they want.

4. Develop pedagogical practices that virtually engage international students

Using a flipped model will give students an opportunity to prepare in advance for class sessions, so consider assigning readings and videos to watch in advance and then using class time to discuss and apply the new material. During class sessions, some international students may be more comfortable sharing ideas in pairs or small groups, so use Blackboard Collaborate's breakout room function to have students discuss or apply what they have learned. Be sure to offer clear instructions both orally and in writing before putting students into groups, and then bring the whole class together as a follow-up after the breakout session. Instead of requiring international students to speak on the spot, consider having them prepare and share short [VoiceThread](#) presentations and comment on their classmates' presentations, or design and share Adobe Spark videos or webpages using [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) to communicate ideas with some advance preparation. These technologies are easy to use, and students have access to them through GW.

5. Re-evaluate your feedback and assessment practices

Make sure assignment prompts and evaluation criteria are easy to access, clearly written, and easy to understand. Consider new ways to deliver feedback on student work using document annotation tools, screencasting, online peer review, and one-on-one virtual conferences. For international students who need to watch recorded versions of synchronous sessions, develop clear guidelines for any alternate assessments they might need to do to "participate" in these sessions and meet course learning goals. For example, students could post a VoiceThread presentation applying and/or responding to what other students did during the synchronous session and post it by a certain deadline.

6. Build community

Design activities and tasks that intentionally create opportunities for students to get to know one another, such as video peer interview projects (using Adobe Spark video) or low-stakes team activities or projects. Consider assigning a class "buddy" to international students who cannot be on campus; international students may be more likely to seek help from a peer than from a professor, and connecting with a GW peer can be a good source of social support in uncertain times. You can also create ways to socialize students into the GW campus community through guest speakers, interview assignments, and having students virtually explore the GW or DC community.

7. Increase tolerance for "writing/speaking with an accent" and respect for international students' cultural and linguistic strengths

International students may be self-conscious about their English language proficiency, so it is a good idea to send an early message about the value multilingual students bring to our learning communities and provide guidelines for how students should interact with one another in a hybrid or online setting. For example, your international students' writing may now be visible to the entire class when it was not visible before, or their speaking during class may be recorded for others to watch. Thus letting members of the class know that "accented" communication is acceptable – and even welcomed – can ease international students' affective concerns and promote respect for linguistic diversity. Be aware that incidences of discrimination against Asian students are increasing and be prepared to intervene if you observe inappropriate behavior or comments. Pay extra attention to unmoderated discussion board posts and watch out for xenophobia, which has been on the rise and targeting students from China in particular.

8. Try soliciting questions privately and requiring occasional one-on-one meetings

International students who hesitate to speak openly may feel more comfortable using the Blackboard Collaborate private chat function when asking questions during class. You can also use the polling

function or private chats to check for student understanding, for example at the end of class you can ask students to share one thing they learned and the “muddiest point” from the class session. It is also a good idea to actively encourage the use of virtual office hours because some international students come from cultures in which it is considered impolite to impose upon teachers. Requiring short student conferences can make students feel seen, provide necessary support and guidance, and help you identify problems before they escalate. If you have too many students to meet with individually, consider requiring an immediate one-on-one meeting with only those students who seem to be struggling or disengaged. Keep time zone differences in mind when scheduling meetings.

9. **Share GW resources and provide support**

Educate yourself and your students about the support resources that students at GW have access to, as well as opportunities to engage with the GW community. The [International Services Office](#) (ISO) and the [English for Academic Purposes](#) (EAP) program focus exclusively on working with international students, and for a list of GW resources for international students, see [GW Campus Resources for International Students](#). If you have concerns about an international student in your class, don't forget the [CARE Network](#).

10. **Be flexible and accommodating**

Your international students might be joining your class from all kinds of settings and time zones and dealing with myriad issues that you might not know about, including visa and travel issues, personal or family financial concerns, medical/health issues or safety protocols, the lack of a support system, and concerns about academic workload or managing coursework in English. It is also easy to fall behind or feel disconnected if you are unable to join a class in person or even synchronously. Try to be understanding, and proactively reach out to negotiate a mutually acceptable way to complete classwork or address any issues that come up.

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CHINA SPECIFIC TIPS

- **Consider multiple forms of communication due to potential technical difficulties**

In 2019, 52% of the international student community at GW was from China. Several GW offices and schools have reported struggling to connect with Chinese students via GW email addresses, which are actually Gmail accounts (and therefore blocked in China). Blackboard itself should be fine, so consider using Blackboard as your primary means of communication, or finding a different communication method that your entire class can use. We do not recommend emailing your students using private email addresses due to security issues. Students may also need to take extra steps to use two-step authentication to log on to GW systems, like downloading the Microsoft Authenticator app or requesting a 2SA reset from ithelp@gwu.edu.

- **Avoid using websites or applications that are blocked in China as course materials**

It has been reported that Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Box/Dropbox, Slack, Skype, WhatsApp, and the websites of many news outlets are blocked in China ([Cox 2020](#)). Anticipate that more websites will be added to this list as more students in China access distance learning at U.S. universities; consider checking URLs at [Comparitech](#) to see whether they are blocked in China.

- **Be aware that Chinese students might be practicing self-censorship due to government surveillance**

Last year, upon returning to his hometown a Chinese student studying at the University of Minnesota was arrested for tweeting something critical of the government (Theisen, 2020). Your students might have serious concerns about exercising freedom of speech in your class, especially if their writing or speaking is shared with others. Consider offering options when designing assignment prompts and class activities so that students can avoid topics that might put them in jeopardy.



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