The international students in the Internationalizing Teaching and Learning (ITL) cohort noticed that international students, particularly were lively and productive during discussions, while other groups had almost no discussions. Changes were also made to the course involvement of international students and domestic students within their assigned groups and to highlight the value that international perspectives brought to the groups. We present observations and some preliminary data regarding the involvement of international students in the course.

Course Description

Environmental Biology is a course designed for non-biology majors that fulfills Liberal Education requirements. Students in this class often describe themselves as "non-science people" and sometimes are somewhat science adverse. The course is taught in one of the "Active Learning Classrooms" which have up to 19 round tables that seat 9 students each. Figure 1. Student small group discussions are an important part of the instruction. In early semesters of the course offering, the instructors noticed that while some student groups had lively and productive discussions, other groups had almost no discussion and uncomfortable silence when the group was called on in the larger class setting. Instructors noticed that international students particularly were struggling both with participating in the course discussion and with scores on exams. Changes were made to the course to improve the group-aspects of the course, and during this time one of the authors (DW) participated in the Internationalizing Teaching and Learning (ITL) cohort program. Through this experience new activities were implemented that aimed to improve the experience for international students.

Activities

Some example activities implemented to help facilitate greater group participation.

- **Technique:** Student tables are assigned before the first day of class. Students taking the class with lab are assigned to a group that is within their lab section.

- **Observations:** The frequency of non-participation in group discussions went down. Before groups were assigned, students appeared to self-segregate into groups, decreasing the diversity of perspectives at a table and causing some tables to be non-communicative. As an unexpected bonus, the laboratory TAs noted that groups in the lab sections became more communicative with each other.

- **Technique:** Most days one reporter per table is chosen by some criteria that fosters communication (who is wearing the most colorful socks, who woke up earliest, etc.)

- **Observations:** There is broader participation in the large group discussions beyond the "usual suspects." Casual dialog is encouraged in the picking of the reporter.

- **Technique:** The Magic Eight Ball application (developed by Dr. Mark Decker) chooses which group to call on.

- **Observations:** This keeps the tables ready to be called on, fostering better participation. The visual of the 8-ball lets them know to be prepared. This also prevents the instructors from avoiding certain tables that might be under-prepared.

- **Technique:** On the first day of class notecards numbered 1-9 are passed out to the class. Students are instructed to order themselves 1-9 based on the distance where they consider "home" is from the Twin Cities campus. Students then go around the table describing one environmental issue they grew up thinking about. This begins the discussion of the fact that we see environmental issues through a lens of our prior experiences. Students are encouraged to share their perspectives and where these perspectives come from. On the second day of class students order themselves with notecards on how urban versus rural their home is. We discuss how both location and the urban/rural upbringing affect our perceptions of environmental issues and that people from homes that are very distant may share more perspectives in common based on the urban/rural nature of their upbringing than students from diverse backgrounds.

- **Observations:** Getting students to view their home as a diverse asset is one of our goals and having them share their perspectives based on their unique histories is valuable in class. Since doing this we have had international students share their experiences and perspectives from their homes with the entire class.

- **Technique:** At the introduction to the Food unit, students spend a few minutes describing to their group table that meal or food item that "felt like home" to them. Then, instructor then shares their food (for one it was meatloaf... don't judge until you've tried her mother's meatloaf). We discuss how deeply embedded culture and emotion are into food choices. Observations: in the past we have had students who seemed to feel attacked by the data regarding food choices, particularly around meat consumption. Sharing, and to some extent, celebrating the food items with classmates seems to help ease some of the hard feelings that can occur. The discussion about the environmental costs of meat consumption seem more palatable when the professor admits to liking meat.

- **Technique:** During the ITL workshop we learned of a resource to get international students to come to classes that was available through the UMN Culture Corps program. For this class we often have an evening farming panel in which people with farming expertise come share their experiences about what food production is like in reality. I was able to bring in two international students to participate in this panel.

- **Observations:** The international students brought a different perspective to the panel that was not previously available in the mostly local farmers.

Abstract

All students can benefit from representation of diverse backgrounds and experiences in a classroom setting. Here we describe efforts to more fully engage all students in the in-class discussions in a large-enrollment Environmental Biology course. We describe some changes made to a course after the instructor participated in the Internationalizing Teaching and Learning cohort program at the University of Minnesota. These simple changes were meant to foster better engagement between international students and domestic students within their assigned groups and to highlight the value that international perspectives brought to the groups. We present observations and some preliminary data regarding the involvement of international students in the course.

Data

This instructor effectively facilitated interactions (e.g., discussions, group projects) among students from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., White students, students of color, international students).

Future Directions

We have further analyses that need to be done on data from pre- and post-semester surveys. The surveys include a tool to understand students’ perceptions of their group, what they have learned from their teammates and what their teammates have learned from them! We are interested in the perspectives of international students in comparison to domestic students on the team aspects of the course.

We would further like to develop international perspectives presented in the class by, for example, spending more time on environmental policy and important environmental issues outside the US.

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