

Cultural borderlands: Cultural differences in teaching and learning

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This workshop, based on a post-graduate case study of cross-cultural interaction in an international school, identifies problems that students from different cultures experience in the predominantly western culture of international schools.

The recurring patterns of behaviour, or cultural meaning systems, that define culture and differentiate between societies, are especially apparent in their attitudes to education. What is common to all is education as the transmitter of cultural values, as well as of the knowledge and skills specific to that society's needs. However the way in which they are transmitted, taught, learned and assessed, as well as their nature, varies tremendously. For migrant students, these differences will cause a culture clash between home and school, as children from different cultural backgrounds are socialized in conflict with the expectations of the school. In their efforts to encourage success for all students, irrespective of whether they come from a Western cultural background or not, it is essential that schools recognise, acknowledge and work with these differences.

The workshop will examine the use of language and discourse in classroom interaction. Learning, as the development of cognitive processes as well as the acquisition of knowledge, is highly dependent on context and social interaction. For culturally diverse classes, creating the right classroom environment and relevant contexts is crucial. Evidence from the classroom is used to show how the marked differences in teaching and learning styles affect the learning and achievement of the students. Using simulations, the causes of dissonance between the predominantly western teaching style of international school teachers and the preferred learning styles of students from other cultures are analysed. A model of critical learning, where different learning styles are recognised in the classroom and a non-culture specific curriculum, accessible to all pupils and delivered in a more pluralist style, are discussed.