



Interculturality in the International Classroom

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Interculturality in the International Classroom

- SESSION OUTLINE

Part 1

Can classic cultural dimensions explain our teaching experience in international classrooms?

Part 2

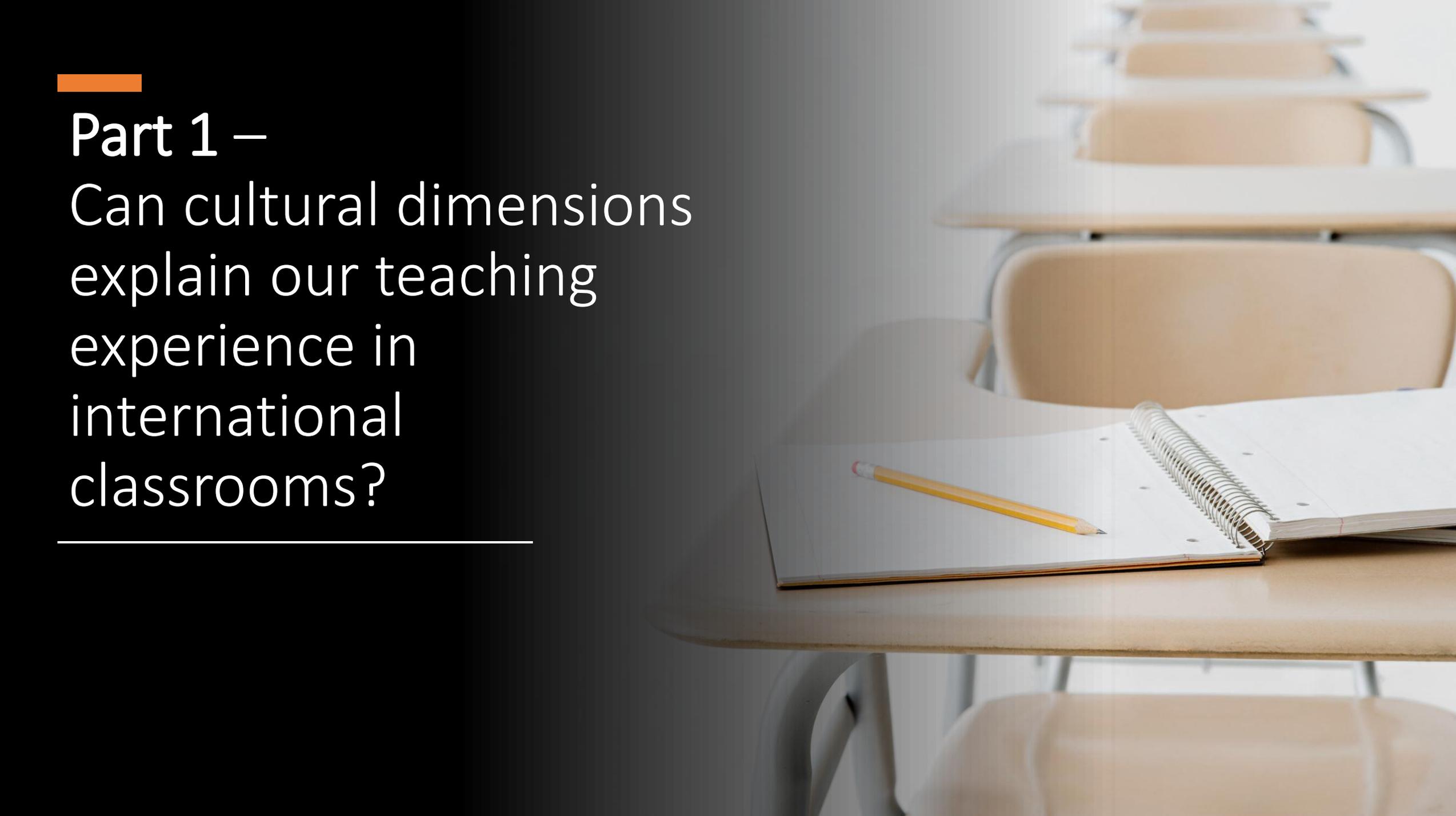
What could interculturality in the classroom look like?

Interculturality and Othering

- ‘The positioning and negotiation of individuals who come from different space-times’ (Dervin 2011)
- Dervin avoiding the term *culture* and has good reason to – intercultural studies as a field is problematic



- Anthropologist Edward Hall (US) and social psychologist Geert Hofstede (Netherlands) considered the founding fathers of intercultural communication studies
- Explaining the Other from an American-Eurocentric perspective
- BUT some of their insights still resonate

The background of the slide is a photograph of a classroom. It shows a row of light-colored wooden desks and matching chairs. In the foreground, a spiral-bound notebook is open on a desk, with a yellow pencil resting on it. The lighting is soft and even, creating a clean, professional look.

Part 1 –
Can cultural dimensions
explain our teaching
experience in
international
classrooms?

One of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: Power distance (intracultural and intercultural)

- How people from different cultures view power relationships
- **Low power distance**
 - Question authority and expect to participate in decisions that affect them
 - Expect power relationships to be participatory, democratic, and consultative
 - Feel entitled to participate in decision making
- **High power distance**
 - Deferential to figures of authority and generally accept an unequal distribution of power
 - Tend to view power as a reality of life and believe everyone has a specific place in the hierarchy of power

Example: Perceived hierarchy within and between cultures

'I have British flatmates, and they always talk about the Queen or the royal family, and it's quite comfortable to talk. But in Thailand, we cannot talk about this stuff. You have to keep silent, all the time, you have to keep quiet. I dunno why. We cannot criticise the royals... It affects me like less than other Thai people, but it also is something that affects me. And, I don't feel confident enough to criticise a big name. If someone is the professor in a subject or something like that, and I have to criticise their work, I will feel a bit nervous about my thoughts and if they are good enough. And, I really struggle[d] with the first half of this year of my study.'

Thai student MA Philosophy, University of York



Sociologist Doreen Massey



[Anthony Tran](#) [Unsplash](#)

Power Distance

1. Have you experienced power distance in your classrooms?
2. What happens when a teacher comes from a society with low power distance teaching students from a society with high power distance? Or vice versa
3. What happens when there is power distance between different groups of students?

→ How could this distance be reduced?

One of Hall's cultural dimensions: High and low context cultures

- The extent to which people focus on contextual (indirect) or verbal (direct) information varies:
- **Low context cultures:** Rely on explicit communication
 - A message needs to be spelled out and verbalised
 - Rules and expectations are explicitly outlined
- **High context cultures:** Rely on implicit communication and non-verbal queues
 - A message cannot be understood without background knowledge
 - Roles are implicit, clearly defined, and one acts according to one's role
- Common problem area between high and low: silence
 - Low context cultures find silence uncomfortable and view it negatively – silence communicates a problem or that something is wrong
 - High context cultures are happy with silence – silence can communicate mutual understanding

Cultural coach Dr. Tom Verghese on low vs high context cultures



Low vs High Context

1. Have you found students not understanding or misinterpreting your classroom activities and/or your formative and summative assessments?
2. What happens to students from high context cultures when they switch to another cultural context?
3. What do you think happens if a teacher from a low context culture teaches students from a high context culture?

→ What contextual information could you spell out more explicitly for your students so that they understand your ILOs, assignment expectations, the concept plagiarism, etc.?

From cultural dimensions to interculturality

- The way we just used the classical cultural dimensions framework moves away from cultural essentialism towards a reflective practice that is detached from national stereotypes
- Interculturality does not try to explain the 'Other' but reflects on the constantly evolving relationships between groups
- Intercultural teaching then is a transformative and equity seeking practice → it's not about mastering knowledge or competencies but is a relational, critical and reflective journey
- Fine, but HOW DOES IT LOOK IN PRACTICE?



Part 2 – What could interculturality in the classroom look like?



Self-reflection on cultural identity

The following questions provide a starting place for reflecting on your own cultural identity and its impact on you as an educator (Adapted from Ellerbrock et al., 2016).

- Describe your cultural identity.
- Reflect on a specific situation where your cultural identity was affirmed.
- Reflect on a specific situation where your cultural identity was questioned.
- Describe the ways in which your cultural identity impacts your work as an educator.
- What assumptions do you believe students might make about your cultural identity? How might these impact your interactions with students?
- What parts of your cultural identity do you share with students? Which are you less likely to share in the classroom?

(Example from Page 2021:

<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofinterculturalteaching/chapter/culturalanddisciplinaryidentities/>)

Get to know yourself

- A realignment of teaching practice with an international student audience starts with self-awareness



Analyse tricky classroom situations without judgement

Describe
Analyse
Evaluate



Image Credit: Peter Griffin (Public Domain)

By jumping immediately to evaluation, the observer might conclude that the students are texting in class. They might also conclude that the students are behaving disrespectfully, and that they are not interested in learning the course content.

What other possibilities might emerge through applying the DAE framework?

Description: Two students are looking at their cellphones. They are currently not participating verbally in the classroom discussion. One student appears to be entering text into an app.

Analysis: What are the possible explanations? (1) The students are texting; (2) The students are using a dictionary to find the meaning of an unknown word; (3) The students are using their cell phones to take notes on an important concept; (4) The students are using the internet to find information related to the class topic.

Evaluation: Our evaluation of the situation – and the actions we might take as a result – are greatly influenced by our perceptions of what is going on. For example, perhaps we discover that the students are not texting, but are in fact using a dictionary on their phones to clarify their understanding of a key term. With this information, we might decide to allow the students to continue this practice. We might also find ways of modifying the class to make content clearer, perhaps by providing more information visually on PowerPoint slides, or by providing a glossary of key terms.



Get to know your international students

- Lee et. al. (2017) also emphasise the importance of self-awareness through critical reflection and the time this takes but they also suggest some simple things you could do
 - To improve the classroom climate and enable students to participate, they suggest a number of relatively easy rapport building activities that can be integrated at the beginning as well as throughout a course:
1. Learn names and attempt correct pronunciation – model this for everyone in the class.
 2. Ask students anonymously what to them supports a feeling of being respected.
 3. Ask your students whether they are familiar with active learning. Explain what it is and emphasise the value of active and peer interactive learning. Do this a few times throughout the course.
 4. Incorporate time for quiet writing and organisation of thoughts before verbal discussions.
 5. Introduce ungraded post-discussion reflections to give students a chance to feedback on whether they feel included or whether there are unaddressed needs or barriers.

Suggestion – Community of Practice



Interested? Get in touch:

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References & Resources

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