Reflective Practice

In pursuit of effective learning across cultures

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

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CENTER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE
TEACHING AND LEARNING

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The Mission of Saint Louis University is the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity.

At the core of this mission is innovative teaching in academic environments that promote free, active, intellectual inquiry for students and instructors of all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

As instructors, we give shape to this mission, interacting directly with students and championing their learning. Teaching brings an ever-evolving list of challenges in addition to the other responsibilities that we may be juggling. The teaching context has also evolved in a post-pandemic world in which SLU's student body continues to grow increasingly diverse. The creation of this document is a result of the Reinert Center's longstanding commitment to its vision of Saint Louis University as a transformative learning community where all teachers and learners have access to meaningful, equitable, and engaging learning experiences.

This resource is designed to introduce the core foundations of effective teaching with an emphasis on responding to the multitude of cultures represented in our classrooms. It has been designed to be helpful for long time instructors, new hires, and adjunct/part-time instructors.

In addition to offering details about the Saint Louis University teaching context, it introduces concrete suggestions for improving learning in our classes. The information in this document is only a small selection of the potential resources related to course design, teaching, and working responsively across cultures. It serves as an introduction to the Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning and a reminder of the reflective nature of our University mission and the associated pedagogical frameworks.

Aspire for reflection on the information presented as we search for the "truth" in our teaching contexts. In doing so, you may find yourself brainstorming numerous potential changes to courses or feeling overwhelmed by the possibilities.

Evaluate what is realistic and remember:
Cura personalis, care for the whole person, is as important for instructor as it is for students.

SLU's History and the Cultures in Which We Teach

Saint Louis University, founded in 1818, has a history that lends itself to critical reflection on the nature of culture and context. In 1829, the University, known as Saint Louis College at the time, began to be operated by the local chapter of Jesuits. From 1829 to 1865, the University relied on the efforts of slaves. Reconciling the realities of this history with the University's mission, which emphasizes inclusion while welcoming instructors, staff, and students from all backgrounds, is a daunting task.

> "The advancement of diversity and inclusion at SLU – and our actions to address each item in the Accords – is not the sole responsibility of one person, one school, or one division. It takes all of us to change an institution, which like our society was built upon a system of inequality."
>
> Dr. Fred P. Pestello
> University President 2011-2025

This is compounded by the more recent history of the University, which was impacted heavily by the officer-involved shootings of Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson, MO. Protests gathered around the clock tower for six days on the campus mall. The occupy SLU movement led to the development of the Clock Tower Accords, a formal commitment from the University to strengthen inclusivity and access while working with the people of St. Louis to strengthen the city.

These historical facts provide a rich and complex context into which our students enter and may shape the expectations students have for their experience on campus. Will students from historically oppressed groups enter campus feeling supported and expecting equity considering the efforts made by staff and instructors to improve inclusiveness on campus? Or, will there be negative sentiments and a fear of prejudice due to historical slave ownership? What presumptions will students of other religions have about the University due to its strong Jesuit heritage and commitment to a Jesuit mission?

Understanding the University's history and recognizing that each student arrives in your classroom with a different set of experiences, expectations, and understandings helps us remain cognizant of just how varied culture can be.

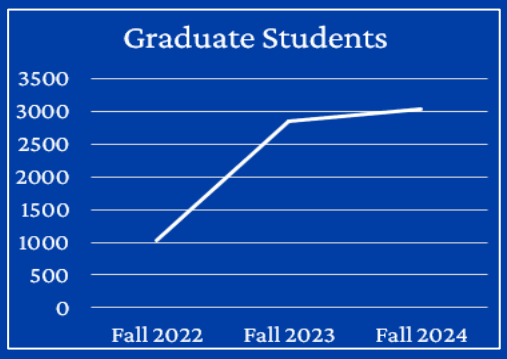
The University Core Outcomes include an assurance that SLU graduates will recognize "transnational or global interdependence" as responsible global citizens (CLO #6). Transparent, reflective, and intentional efforts to acknowledge and incorporate culture into our teaching will go a long way to fulfilling this outcome.

The Shifting Academic Landscape: Enrollment Trends at SLU

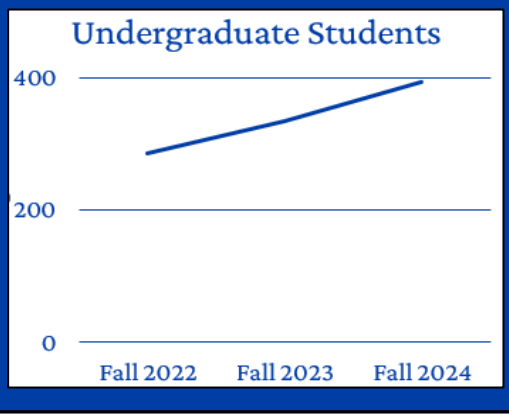
Enrollment trends in higher education continue to evolve, with enrollments dropping as a product of the Covid 19 Pandemic and a sharp decline in birth rates after 2007 (Boeckenstedt, 2022). In response to these changes, many universities are turning to international enrollments to maintain or increase enrollment numbers. SLU is no exception, as our international enrollments have grown dramatically in recent years. Although these numbers may shift from year to year, international students on campus may increase the salience of any cultural differences in the classroom.

Remember, every student brings a unique cultural background that will influence how they interact with instructors and class materials. For instance, since 2017, the number of SLU students self-reporting as Roman-Catholic or Christian has fallen from 39.9% to 19.6%. There are students enrolled from all 50 states, 100 countries, and the percentage of White or Caucasian students has fallen from 65% to 51.5%. In 2024, 20% of undergraduate students were also first-generation college students.

The most notable increase in international enrollments has been in graduate students, where SLU experienced a 295% increase (≈2000 students) from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024.



Undergraduate enrollment of international students is also trending upward, with an 137% increase from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024 (≈110 students)



The depth of culture extends far beyond simple demographic information. In fact, assumptions that are guided by culture are as relevant for instructors as they are for students. For this reason, the definition of culture we will be working with is broad, but intentional in its focus on how our cultures guide interpretation of information.

Culture	Collective patterns of values, beliefs, practices, and assumptions that guide the interpretation of information and events

Every student will enter our classrooms with a different cultural background.

The first step to teaching in a culturally responsive manner is recognizing this as an opportunity to improve learning for all our students.

The culture of the U.S. is one that reflects "individualism," and this broad concept influences teaching and learning in American classrooms in a variety of ways. Learners are held responsible for their own learning and topics are approached through individual parts prior to addressing the more integrative "whole." Objectivity is often prioritized over emotion, objectivity over subjectivity, and individual understanding over group cohesion.

Common Assumptions of the "American Classroom"

- Learning is an individual activity
- Students are responsible for their own learning
- Student participation in class should be vocal and interactive
- Students should be prepared to engage in any activity the instructor presents (e.g., small group discussion)

Chávez and Longerbeam (2016) conceptualize approaches to learning on a continuum between two broad categories: individuated and integrated. *Individuated* approaches to learning are common in Western classrooms and focus on competition, opportunistic participation (i.e., hand raising), sequencing material, and individual assessment. *Integrated* approaches to learning focus on cooperation, subjective experience, process, and communication.

Individuated approaches to education are not entirely U.S. specific, as similar approaches to education are reported in many European countries (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2017). Other cultures may focus more on integrated approaches to learning, with more emphasis on community continuity, shared responsibility for learning, and subjective aspects of the learning process.

These differences influence how students react to our teaching. For example, we may think we are encouraging active learning by incorporating group discussion in our classes. Yet, group discussions may cause anxiety for students from LGBTQ+ and/or more integrated backgrounds who must navigate potential prejudices amongst their groupmates as well as the discussion prompt and expectations put forth by the instructor (Hogan & Sathy, 2022).

Some cultures place value on silence and contemplation. For instance, Merculieff & Roderick (2013) describe the experiences of non-Alaskan Native instructors teaching students from indigenous Alaskan native communities. Alaskan Native people put a strong emphasis on observation and patient contemplation. These students would often take time after being asked questions, sitting quietly in a way

that might feel awkward to someone accustomed to the more rapid pacing, and more vocal nature, of a traditional Western classroom discussion. Students from less individuated cultures relate to time differently than those from individuated cultures, thinking in terms of relationships rather than using time to measure or divide between activities. Time being more relational leads to less emphasis on the importance of being "on time" as extra time may be spent bringing a natural close to a relational activity (e.g., conversation). This may result in an apparent disregard for the importance of the next event (e.g., arriving at class).

Discipline-Specific Cultural Considerations

- How is information shared (scholarship vs. other artifacts)?
- What is the goal of reading?
- How is scholarship evaluated?
- What jargon is common and necessary for communicating in your field?

The Culture of your Discipline as an Additional Cultural Factor

Historical and community context are not the only aspects of culture that influence teaching in our classes. Teaching at Saint Louis University means we are teaching within a university context, with all the associated historical factors in addition to the "American classroom" factors. The Saint Louis University context also includes very specific assumptions and expectations that shape the student learning experience. These include procedural components, reflected in the rules and regulations enforced by the University, as well as cultural components, like the expectation of care for the "whole person" and SLU's Jesuit identity.

Beyond the broad expectations and assumptions at the institution level, our courses also include the collective assumptions of the discipline/major they represent. As experts in our fields, we have spent years acclimating to the assumptions, expectations, and traditions of our disciplines. As such, these expectations inevitably influence our teaching, even if we have not actively reflected on these disciplinary cultural factors. As we prepare to teach, we might reflect on these disciplinary factors to identify places where we may be making assumptions our students do not share, perhaps due to a lack of foundational knowledge to understand. In addressing these assumptions, we may need to go beyond explaining what "someone in our field does" by adding the "why" in the explanation. By doing this, we provide students with an understanding of the intention behind why we, and experts in our field, do things the way that we do.

We bring many cultural assumptions with us, just as each student brings a unique collection of experiences and expectations. These anecdotes serve to illustrate the way cultural differences may shape how our students react to, and perform in, our classrooms.

Varying our instructional methods with *intention* gives all students a chance to demonstrate their *cultural strengths*

The SLU Experience: International Student Perspectives

American instructors may be more familiar with cultural expectations of the western, individualized classroom, leading to better recognition of classroom behaviors incongruent with those expectations. Yet, recognition of American classroom norms being broken does not equate to an understanding of the differing cultural expectations brought by students educated in non-Western classrooms. The importance of teaching in a way that embraces cultural differences is perhaps most easily understood by listening to the voices of the students themselves. Featured here are a variety of quotes from international students at SLU.

"I strongly believe that after setting up these standards, you should *hold your international students to that standard*. As an international student I've been frustrated over how many professors seemed to expect very little from me just because I wasn't American."

"Yes, there does need to be some exceptions but please also believe in us internationals and help us earn the degree we have come all the way to the U.S for- do not give it to me just so you can grade faster."

"You need to be straightforward with your international students and *tell them* how you like classes to operate, *what you think successful students do*."

"Most professors I asked would simply reply, 'well it's up to you. This is college.' If I could have responded frankly to them I would have said, 'I'm asking because this is a U.S American college and my concept of college is very different. I'm asking because I would like to know what the rest of my classmates know'."

The U.S. higher education experience is one that many instructors have been immersed in for years as both students and educators. The "way things are done" may come to feel like second nature, even as our expectations and assumptions are influenced by American classroom norms and the specific culture of our academic disciplines.

The student comments featured here highlight a tendency for instructors to apply a deficit approach when working with international students. *Deficit thinking* is rooted in the idea that there is a "correct" way to be a student and that some students "lack" the necessary tools, ability, or experience to succeed (Davis & Museus, 2019). Instructors applying deficit thinking may lower standards due to a belief that some students lack the capability to meet existing standards, which undermines the goal of holding all students to high expectations and supporting them to meet those expectations.

The comments here also emphasize the need for clarity in instruction and expectations. The classroom experience is likely different in the country from which international students travelled. The challenge of understanding our classrooms adds an additional layer of learning that must be navigated in addition to the class content, increasing the cognitive load for these students and undermining the pursuit of an equitable learning experience.

Suggestions for Effective Teaching Across Cultures

There are several steps we can take to help students from all cultures feel more welcome in our classrooms. The suggestions presented here are evidence-based and have been demonstrated to contribute to positive outcomes for student learning.

Ignatian Pedagogy is a framework for learning derived from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and serves as a way to ensure an approach to teaching with intention and care (more information here). The paradigm includes five elements. Learning occurs within a *context (1)* and is rooted in the interaction between previous *experience (2)* and new learning experiences. R*eflection (3)* deepens learning and is made meaningful when put into *action (4)*. *Evaluation (5)*, both of learning and of your role in the learning process helps to deepen understanding of the *context (1)* of your classroom, at which point the process continues, with new experiences, reflection, actions, and evaluation.

This paradigm is in practice within this document as you've read about the context in which you will be teaching as well as some examples of how culture can shape the presumptions, attitudes, and behaviors of teachers and students. You've also read about the experiences of international students who have reflected on their experiences at SLU. Now comes reflection and action, reflecting on how our existing course structures interact with culture. Understanding the context within which we are teaching can help ensure we are recognizing the diversity of cultures represented in our classrooms while creating learning experiences that support learners from all backgrounds.

What follows are effective practices collected from various sources to help encourage more cultural responsiveness in our teaching. Whether you are new to teaching or have been teaching at SLU for decades, these suggestions are designed to facilitate, inspire, and challenge as you work to support student learning.

Self-Reflection: The First Step

As educators, our teaching is likely to be influenced by cultural assumptions. These assumptions are rooted in our lived experiences, which include the culture where we grew up and the nature of the classrooms in which we were educated. Further, as experts in our fields, we have also been trained to organize information, thoughts, and ideas in ways that are specific to that discipline. In applying the Ignatian principles of reflection and evaluation, we can deepen our understanding by recognizing how our culturally-derived assumptions shape our course materials, assessments, and expectations. Consider the questions featured here and ask yourself: how do these assumptions influence student learning in my course for students who

1) share the same assumptions?
2) have different assumptions and expectations?

Imagine your "most successful" student.

How do they...

- Participate in class?
- Ask questions?
- React to feedback?
- Organize their ideas?
- Support claims?
- Work with peers?
- Write?

Your answers to these questions reflect your academic cultural assumptions.

Step 2: Address Assumptions by Empowering Cultural Capital

Types of Cultural Capital

Aspirational: maintain hope

Linguistic: skills derived from communicating in different languages/cultures

Familial: kinship and community history

Social: social and community networks

Navigational: ability to navigate through institutions

Resistant: skills related to challenging inequality

Recognizing assumptions provides the opportunity to make changes that provide all students with more opportunities to learn in our classes. When students do not behave in a way that matches our assumptions - what we might perceive as the "right" way - the tendency is to assume they lack the understanding, ability, or motivation to "do it right."

This reaction is another example of *deficit thinking*, which is most frequently observed in descriptions of students from historically oppressed populations. There is a tendency to assume cultural, community, or familial explanations for these perceived deficits (Davis & Museus, 2019). The idea of "at risk" students is inherently deficit-based and provides an example of the ease with which deficit thinking can be implicitly reflected in the very educational environments in which we hope to help our students thrive.

As evidenced by the quotations from SLU international students, deficit thinking can and has manifested itself in how SLU instructors have interacted with students. One way to attempt to avoid deficit thinking is

to apply a strengths-focused approach. Yosso (2005) describes six forms of cultural capital: experience-based resources and abilities that include culturally derived strengths in addition to more traditional academic strengths.

We might recognize ways in which our own cultural background has fostered different strengths within this framework. Thinking about our course materials, consider how to empower students to leverage their cultural strengths. Do so with great intention, as a cultural wealth model can be used as just another way to identify deficits. For example - first generation college students *lack* navigational capital vs. first generation college students can *apply* their aspirational capital to support them as they grow more navigational capital. Reframing "deficits" as strengths is especially important because students tend to blame their background or lack of experience for academic challenges despite these same students demonstrating high resilience and resourcefulness (Avila Reyes et al., 2023).

Resist the urge to think "culture is not relevant to my discipline."

Students *feel* the impact of culture as they interact with university and classroom structures. Acknowledging culture and encouraging reflection in the context of the classroom shows students that their experiences matter and helps them see how these experiences are a strength, *not a deficit.*

Step 3: Consider Varied Cultural Perspectives in Your Materials

Cultural capital is a way to recognize cultural influences at the individual level, but we must also consider the way culture is reflected by class content and assessments. When preparing for a course, consider selecting readings, authors, and activities representing a diverse range of perspectives. Whether teaching a course in which the material inherently represents diverse perspectives or one in which material is unavoidably narrow in scope, explicitly recognizing the range of voices represented helps set expectations about the inclusive and culturally responsive nature of the classroom. Similarly, avoiding acknowledging cultural considerations in content and course material sets an expectation in the less-inclusive direction, potentially alienating students.

Students who are accustomed to a classroom that is more integrated may struggle to adjust to individuated work (and visa-versa). As an instructor, revisiting your class materials, in-class activities, and assessments using an individuated vs. integrated framework will help you identify whether there is variety in the cultural frameworks represented in your course (Chávez and Longerbeam, 2016).

What about Course Design?

While course design is not the focus of this document, the principles of culturally responsive teaching are also reflective of effective course design:

Effective course design focuses on student learning with clear learning objectives, varied opportunities to demonstrate learning, and transparency about *why* – why this content, class activity, assessment, feedback, etc.

When courses rely heavily on individual activities, stage-based explanations of theory, and/or a focus on the perspectives of experts, they reflect an individuated-focus. To make a course more inclusive, we might include more integrated activities and assessments in which theory is first framed through student experiences, work is cooperative, and student performance is related to both process and product. Courses that focus heavily on cooperative projects and/or the student-experience in that course apply a more integrated approach. If these courses include little exploration of how content relates to individual concerns, then they run the risk of alienating students accustomed to individuated learning. In these instances, the courses could benefit from the addition of more individuated types of activities.

Varying instructional methods to increase the inclusive nature of a course has positive outcomes for students. For example, when a primarily individuated biology class adopted more integrated methods and made efforts to acknowledge the context of each student, differences in learning outcomes between ethnic groups were reduced and overall, long-term learning improved (Dewsbury et al., 2022).

By varying the individuated vs. integrated nature of course materials, we ensure all students have an opportunity to learn in a way that aligns with their cultural expectations. Doing so also provides opportunities for cultural growth, challenging students to explore course material in ways that may be less comfortable, but ultimately beneficial for all.

Step 4: Adopt Culturally Responsive Assessments and Grading for Growth

Course objectives and how they are assessed reflect what is most important for student learning. Assessment reflects another form of cultural communication with students. In a classroom that embraces culturally diverse perspectives and balances individuated and integrated activities, the way assignments are presented and evaluated may still risk excluding students with different expectations or experiences.

Here are some steps we can take to assess learning in a more culturally responsive manner:

Varying assessment types: *Diagnostic assessments* help identify current levels of knowledge or skill. *Formative assessments* provide students with opportunities for practice and skill development. *Summative assessments* evaluate a product or performance through testing or other product/performance. Including only a few summative assessments, each accounting for a large portion of the overall grade, can cause

stress for students; especially those from underrepresented groups. This can lead to more academic dishonesty and reduced learning (Lang, 2013). More assessments of varying types help to reduce the pressure associated with any single assessment and provide feedback related to learning.

Giving clear and explicit assignment prompts: Assignment instructions will be interpreted through the lens of cultural expectations. Being as explicit as possible with assignment prompts helps to reduce uncertainty for students. Providing clear grading criteria also helps to clarify expectations while reducing potential biases in grading. Transparency in teaching can improve student understanding of their own learning while increasing equity in the classroom - see the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) project to learn more [Website].

Making connections between tasks, activities, and assessments explicit: As instructors, we understand the intended connection between class activities and assessments. Assessments, especially diagnostic and formative assessments, may be designed to connect to or support later assessments. If we share these intentions with students, the connections between learning and assessment is made explicit, helping to better scaffold learning.

Providing choice: When possible, consider providing students with a sense of agency in assessment by offering choices between different types of assessments. Some students may gravitate toward more individuated or integrated assessments. For example, we might provide a choice between a reflective application of theory in their lives or a more traditional summarizing of theory.

Grading for growth: Grading schemes that limit the number of students who can earn top grades, such as grading on a curve, communicate to students that they cannot all earn the top grade. While this may be discouraging and demotivating for many students, these grading schemes may also appeal more to learners accustomed to individuated approaches to learning. Instead, consider using criterion to guide grading, giving students a clear picture of what proficiency in the learning objective looks like. We also may consider grades focused on process rather than product. If we expect students to learn from their mistakes, grading can reflect this by emphasizing effort above correctness. Naturally, the product matters, but clearly focusing on process at times can help provide the skills that will enhance a future product.

Self-Reflection: The First and Last Step

Teaching is an iterative process that lacks an "end point." By reflecting on our assumptions, recognizing the context in which we teach, and challenging ourselves to support the learning of all students, we will increase the cultural responsiveness of our teaching.

Our cultural backgrounds, varied responsibilities as instructors, and additional situational factors may impact our ability to put time and energy into making changes to courses. For this reason, we emphasize adjusting the approach to suit the circumstances. If we are preparing a new course, these considerations can be incorporated from the beginning of the design process, but if we are applying these ideas to courses we have taught in the past, starting with only one or two changes can help to reduce the stress associated with making sweeping changes.

Remember the reflective nature of *Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm* and recognize that *cura personalis* applies to instructors as much as it does students. The actions taken to change the context of our teaching will need to be evaluated and reflected upon, while acknowledging our own needs as we manage various stressors. Making only one to two changes can help provide experiences to guide further reflection. Iterative improvements in the cultural responsiveness of our teaching will help all students feel welcomed and empowered to succeed while learning at SLU.

Resources for Faculty and Students

While there are various suggestions provided here, this guide represents only a small fraction of the teaching context impacted by culture. Syllabus creation, active vs. passive learning, feedback, and specific concerns related to course content, major, class size, learning environment, etc. all represent areas where we might have questions or concerns as we design our classes.

> The Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning provides programming related to all areas of teaching and learning while also offering individual-level services. If you have questions about how to best apply principles of culturally responsive teaching in your classes, or any other teaching-related inquiries, you are encouraged to reach out to schedule a consultation or visit the Reinert Center in Wuller Hall, 2nd Floor, Suite 204. [Website]

While the Reinert Center is the teaching-focused office for instructors, there are other offices on campus that support the diverse needs of instructors and students at SLU.

> Division of Diversity and Innovative Community Engagement (DICE) includes various units that support the needs of students and instructors. The Center for Social Action (CSA) educates students, instructors, and staff on issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. The Cross Cultural Center for Global Citizenship (CCCGC) promotes cultural fluency and supports historically underrepresented populations. [Website]

> English Language Center provides writing support for all Saint Louis University students whose native/primary language is not English. In one-on-one consultations and group workshops, the Center's staff can assist with many language-related areas, including: classwork, TOEFL and SLUWE test-taking strategies, multimedia projects, grammatical accuracy, research skills and conversation practice. The English Language Center is open from the second week of each semester through the last day of classes. It is closed on official University holidays and over breaks. [Website]

> The Office of International Student Services provides support to international students and their families at SLU. They work with students to ensure their transition to learning in a new environment is as smooth as possible. [Website]

> University Writing Services provide individual feedback on writing and composition for students at all levels of education at SLU. They also offer in-class visits to teach about writing resources at SLU [Website]

QR Codes for All Links in the Document

Occupy SLU

Clock Tower Accords

English Language Center

Ignatian Pedagogy CTTL Page

Reinert Center Homepage

TILT Higher Ed

Direct Link for Scheduling a Consultation

DICE page

The Office of International Student Services

Writing Services

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