

4-4-2009

Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures

Nanda Dimitrov

Western University, nanda.dimitrov@uwo.ca

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Recommended Citation

Dimitrov, Nanda, "Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures" (2009). *Purple Guides*. 4.
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Teaching Support Centre Purple Guides



Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures

Nanda Dimitrov

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
Teaching Support Centre



Western
Graduate &
Postdoctoral Studies

A purple banner with white text and a large 'TSC' logo in the background. The banner is overlaid on a photograph of a modern concrete building with a curved facade and a person walking on a sidewalk in the foreground.

WESTERN UNIVERSITY

Teaching Support Centre

The Teaching Support Centre works collaboratively with faculty, graduate students, and staff to advance teaching and learning at The University of Western Ontario.

The TSC is the teaching 'heart' of the university. Our partnership with Western Libraries and Information Technology Services provides us with a unique foundation to deliver support in three main areas: instructional/curriculum development and the scholarship of teaching, learning technologies and online course development, as well as information literacy and research skill development.

The Purple Guides address key issues in educational development, and are designed to foster a culture of excellence in teaching, learning and mentorship among both faculty and graduate students at Western.

More information is available on the TSC website about resources and programs for both faculty and graduate students. To set up individual consultation about teaching, learning or graduate supervision issues, please contact us at the email address listed below.

Teaching Support Centre

Western University

Room 122 • The D. B. Weldon Library

London, Ontario • Canada • N6A 3K7

Telephone: (519) 661-2111 ext. 80346

tsc@uwo.ca • www.uwo.ca/tsc

Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures

Teaching Support Centre

Nanda Dimitrov



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dimitrov, Nanda, 1973-

Western guide to mentoring graduate students across cultures [electronic resource] / Nanda Dimitrov.

(Teaching Support Centre purple guides, 1916-6893)

Includes bibliographical references.

Also available in print format.

ISBN 978-0-7714-2704-6

1. Graduate students, Foreign--Supervision of.
2. Faculty advisors.
3. Mentoring in education.
4. Multicultural education.
5. Intercultural communication.

I. Western University. Teaching Support Centre II. Title. III. Series: Teaching Support Centre purple guides (Online)

LB2376.6.C3 D54 2009a

378.1'94046

C2009-900817-3

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Introduction

The supervision and mentoring of graduate students is a challenging exercise in effective interpersonal communication even when the faculty member and student share the same cultural background. Differing expectations about workload, progress, and a considerable power gap often create the perfect conditions for misunderstanding in this curiously symbiotic relationship. Throw a few cultural differences in communication styles into the mix, and we certainly face a communication conundrum. The challenges, however, can be overcome, and cross-cultural supervisory relationships can be productive and rewarding, if both the faculty member and the student learn about each other's assumptions, expectations, and communication strategies.

The most frequently occurring challenges in supervising graduate students across cultures revolve around five themes: (1) assumptions about the nature of research and knowledge production; (2) cultural differences in power and status; (3) differing needs for saving face; (4) cultural differences in communication styles; and (5) expectations about following rules. This guide examines these and additional factors that influence the international graduate student-supervisor relationship. It focuses on intercultural supervisor-student relationships and examines the interaction of students and faculty outside the classroom, emphasizing the impact of cultural differences on interpersonal communication during one-on-one mentoring, collaborative research, and thesis writing. The guide provides concrete suggestions on how to establish productive relationships and illustrates the challenges and rewards of working across cultures through case studies at the end of the volume.

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WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM READING THIS GUIDE?

The guide will be a useful resource for faculty members or postdoctoral scholars who supervise "across-cultures." As a result of increasing internationalization at Western, intercultural interactions not only take place between Canadian faculty and students from overseas, but also between Canadian students and faculty from non-English speaking backgrounds, as well as between scholars and students from two different cultures interacting in the Canadian academic context. For example, a Chinese faculty member may supervise Iranian graduate students and work to resolve disagreements through a department chair from Southeast Asia or Europe. Faculty, postdocs, and students who work across cultures will all find the examples and suggestions in the guide informative as they work to bridge cultural differences during collaborative projects. Postdocs may be able to relate to both the mentor and the mentee role, depending on whether they have the opportunity to mentor graduate students working with them in the lab.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

The majority of the information in the guide is based on the growing literature on graduate supervision and mentoring across cultures, as well as on research in cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication. In order to illustrate the communication patterns identified in the literature with local examples, we conducted focus group discussions with international graduate students at Western in December 2008. The quotes by Western students in the guide reflect the major themes that emerged during the focus group discussions. Eleven students from eight countries, representing six faculties participated in two sessions. We recruited participants through an email sent to all graduate students. Participation was voluntary. During the conversation, we asked students about the qualities of effective supervisors, the differences between their expectations and their experience with mentorship, and the cultural differences they noticed as they interacted with their faculty mentors.

A FEW CAVEATS

Predicting individual behaviour based on cultural patterns is challenging for three main reasons. The first reason is that describing the behaviour of individuals from any culture involves a significant amount of generalization. Not all Canadians and not all Chinese, for example, act alike. Based on empirical research in cross-cultural psychology, anthropology, and intercultural communication, however, we can make some predictions about typical patterns of interpersonal communication in these cultures, and anticipate some of the challenges that supervisors and students from particular cultural groups are likely to encounter as they work together (Cryer and Okorochoa, 1999).

The second reason is that the longer students stay in Canada, the less typically Chinese, French or Iranian their communication style will be. The behavioural repertoire of a student who arrived from China a month ago is likely to match the description of “typical Chinese learners” more closely (Biggs and Watkins, 2001) than the behavioural repertoire of a student in the final year of his doctoral program. The communication style of students who have been in Canada for a few years is likely to include a unique combination of elements representing Chinese and Canadian culture as well as other cultures that the student has been exposed to during their studies at Western (Kim, 2001).

The third challenge is that no matter how well adapted students are, they are likely to revert to communication patterns of their home culture when they are under stress (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001). So a fourth-year Russian doctoral candidate who disagrees with her supervisor constructively according to “Canadian expectations” most of the time, may find herself becoming more blunt and express more emotion in the midst of conflict over the last chapter of her thesis. In Russian culture, arguing with passion and being direct are both viewed positively in interpersonal communication, so she may return to this pattern in a stressful situation (Hammer, 2005).



CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND RESPECT FOR STUDENTS' CULTURAL ORIGIN

During their studies at Western, international students will learn to interact effectively in Canadian culture, but they will also maintain many of the elements of their culture of origin. It is important to note that both of these are necessary for successful cultural adaptation, and that adapting to another culture does *not* mean giving up the values or traits of one's culture of origin.

Effective intercultural communication requires that both individuals involved are aware of the impact of culture on their interaction, and that they both adapt their communication style to some extent in order to get their message across to the other successfully. Clearly, students will make greater accommodations than faculty members. Some faculty will meet their students halfway, while others will expect students to adapt to a greater extent. The key factor to success is **clarifying expectations**, and **checking in frequently** to make sure that one's message was understood as intended.

Cultural adaptation is a process during which individuals undergo behavioural and psychological changes as a result of living in a previously unfamiliar cultural environment (Berry, 1997; Ward, 1996). As international students adapt to their new environment, they come to understand the behaviour of host culture members (cognitive adaptation); they learn to behave appropriately according to host culture norms (behavioural adaptation); and they may adopt some host cultural values to some degree (affective adaptation) (Kim, 2001). Adaptation is a process of selective learning, during which individuals typically adopt some beliefs, behaviours and values of the host culture and retain some beliefs, behaviours, and norms of their culture of origin (Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2004). It involves both *acculturation*, acquiring a new repertoire of skills, and *deculturation*, unlearning of certain elements of one's original behavioural and cognitive repertoire (Kim, 2001).

As international students make choices about the types of Canadian academic expectations they need to adapt to and the ones they choose not to adapt to, it is important for them to be well informed about which cultural expectations are flexible, and which are not. They also need to learn how their behaviour may be perceived by Canadians during job interviews or conference presentations. For example, a student from Brazil would need to learn that arriving five minutes late to a job interview (acceptable in Brazil) would be regarded very negatively in Canada, so punctuality is a norm they should conform to in a professional setting. At the same time they may learn that arriving late to a social gathering may be acceptable, so it is not necessary for them to change their more fluid and flexible concept of time in social settings.

Mentors and faculty supervisors can play a crucial role in helping students adapt by letting them know which of the culture's and the university's expectations are negotiable, and which are not. Clearly, students are expected to conform to the university's Student Code of Conduct, observe its guidelines for academic integrity, and respect its human rights and discrimination policy. These norms are stated in writing, so they are relatively easy for students to learn about, but most expectations for scholarly behaviour in the disciplines are not documented, so students need to learn them from their peers, faculty supervisors, and departmental staff.

Helping Students Adapt to Canadian Academia

"As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own."

(Margaret Mead, 1928, p.11)

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International students are involved in a dual process of culture learning. In addition to learning about the culture of their discipline, they are also learning about appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving and communicating in Canadian culture in general. Their ability to communicate in ways that are seen as effective in the academic/professional context is a crucial factor in their success, and faculty supervisors play a very important role in helping them acquire this knowledge.

SUPERVISORS CAN CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS

In their role as mentors, supervisors are in a position to clarify expectations and explain the norms of the discipline. Faculty advisors are also able to observe and give feedback on students' behaviour during everyday interactions. Many international students wish that more colleagues around them would help them understand Canadian cultural norms and expectations by letting them know when they make mistakes. The experience voiced by one of our engineering students from Egypt during a workshop is shared by many: *"I used to interrupt people all the time. In my culture it is a sign of being interested. I kept making the same mistake, because people were too polite to correct me."*

SUPERVISORS CAN ACKNOWLEDGE THE INFLUENCE OF THE STUDENT'S HOME CULTURE

It is also important for mentors to “acknowledge and validate students’ prior educational, professional and cultural knowledge and experience” by encouraging them to share the different approaches to scholarship and communication they bring with them from their home cultures (CELTS, 2003). Faculty can encourage students to talk about the approaches to scholarship in their home cultures during graduate seminars, office hours or informal departmental social events. Interest in students’ experience will create openness and promote dialogue about cultural differences in all areas of communication.

SUPERVISORS CAN ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO DEVELOP SOFT SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN ACADEMIA

Developing the ability to communicate effectively with Canadians and with members of other cultures represented in Western’s diverse campus community will contribute to students’ success well after graduation. During their few years with us, graduate students learn important soft skills – interpersonal communication skills, presentation skills, effective writing, project management – that are valued by employers both in and outside of academia, and that will complement the technical skills they acquire during their coursework and research.

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CULTURAL ADAPTATION WILL TAKE OVER TWO YEARS

Learning a new culture takes time. Graduate students born and raised in Canada take at least six months to fully adapt to the context of a new university upon entering a graduate program. Given the multiple challenges faced by international graduate students, this transition may take up to two years (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001). Professional development programs that include components on cross-cultural communication competence and that clarify Canadian academic norms speed up the process of culture learning significantly. A number of programs are offered by the Teaching Support Centre (TSC), the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS), and Student Development Services (SDS) to support graduate students in adapting to the Canadian academic environment (see Appendix 2), but these cannot replace the day-to-day mentoring students receive from their immediate faculty supervisors.

MENTORS CAN HELP DEVELOP THE STUDENT'S DISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

One of the ways faculty supervisors can support graduate students on their journey towards becoming independent scholars of the discipline is to help them develop *communication competence* in their discipline – that is, to help them talk the talk and walk the walk of biologists or civil engineers.

In the context of graduate education, communication competence is the ability to communicate with members of one's own discipline and members of other disciplines in a way that is:

- perceived as effective in reaching rewarding objectives (e.g., completing the degree, obtaining research funding or employment) (Spitzberg, 1988)
- appropriate to the academic/professional context in which the interaction occurs (Spitzberg, 1988)
- allows young researchers to establish meaningful relationships with members of the other culture (Hammer, 1989) (e.g., work with research supervisors, network with faculty mentors or peers)

Disciplinary communication competence plays a crucial role in the success of young researchers. The ability to present research, write grant proposals, and communicate and network with scholars in culturally appropriate ways often determines whether students will get grants, land jobs or publish research during graduate school, and also impacts their scholarly activities long after graduation.

SUPERVISORS CAN GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

When graduate students behave according to their home cultures' unspoken assumptions, their actions may be interpreted by members of other cultures as either inappropriate or ineffective. For example, if a student from Latin America writes his research paper using circular logic and as a result takes quite long to get to the point, the paper may be perceived as unorganized. The student's supervisor may conclude that the student does not really know what he is talking about. Until the student learns about cultural differences in academic writing and realizes that a Canadian audience will perceive a linear, straightforward presentation as more effective and appropriate in an academic setting than a circular one, he will not be able to get the approval of his supervisor or successfully publish papers in peer reviewed journals (Fox, 1994). Through mentorship and lots of practice, most students will develop disciplinary communication competence and are able to communicate with academic colleagues effectively and form positive, collaborative work relationships along the way.

On the next few pages you will find a review of some the cultural differences that lead to misunderstanding between graduate students and their supervisors most frequently. As you read each section, try to articulate for yourself what the expectations are for appropriate communication in your discipline in that particular area. Think about how you could explain these expectations to new students in the department.

The Impact of Culture on the Supervisory Relationship

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

"If the student is to be successful, he or she must gain a genuine appreciation of the need to formulate a personal response to the research problem, a response which is distinctive, forceful, challenging and, above all, original."

(Knight, 1999, p.96).

Many of the central assumptions of conducting research in North American academic settings are unspoken, and not necessarily shared by scholars from overseas (Cryer and Okorochoa, 1999). For example, the expectation to be original in one's research and to be able to critique the work of others is contrary to prevailing norms in some cultures in South and East Asia. These cultures emphasize maintaining harmony in the community, which creates expectations for scholars to reiterate widely accepted or dominant perspectives rather than challenge existing knowledge (Knight, 1999).

As a result, graduate students from Confucian educational cultures such as China or Korea are likely to arrive at Canadian universities with relatively little experience in designing original research or pointing out the shortcomings of the existing literature. Historically, in their cultures "the role of reading was to (re)discover what the sage was saying, while the role of writing was to reveal the truth held in the text for a larger audience, rather than to argue with it... The aim of education was the simple transfer of knowledge and skills with emphasis on the conservation and reproduction of knowledge, at the expense of its testing, through the avoidance of any explicit evaluations or judgments" (Smith 1999, p. 149). When asked to critique a particular account of history, a Chinese student reportedly asked: "How can I challenge history? History happened" (Smith 1999, p. 151).

"If you give me an acceptance, you should have something I have to work on."

(PhD student from the Middle East, Science)



Similarly, students from East and South Asia may not realize that they are expected to take initiative in designing their own research paths and research questions, and frequently wait for their supervisor to assign the question they will research. They assume that their research will consist of finding evidence to support the hypotheses the supervisor identifies. Studies on the adaptation of international graduate students find that most students are able to and willing to adapt to the expectation to take initiative in research once this expectation is made explicit for them (Smith, 1999; Knight, 1999; Eland, 2001).

“In the [North] American system...if you don’t know, it’s your responsibility to go and ask questions. But in our system, we look at the teacher as someone who has been on that path before you. So he has all the questions and the answers from his experience. He is preparing you to tap into his experience and go forward.”

(West African student, cited in Eland, 2001, p. 100)

The degree of initiative shown by international students here at Western varies greatly. In a survey of more than 200 incoming Western graduate students in the fall of 2007, international graduate students indicated that they expected somewhat more direction from their supervisors than Canadian students. As part of the survey, we asked new students to list some of the questions they would ask their graduate supervisors during the first meeting at the beginning of their program. Some of the questions that suggested an expectation of greater direction from the supervisor included: *Would you give me a research direction you want me to do?* and *What is my topic?* Questions that indicated an expectation of initiative on the part of the student included: *What is your way and method in supervision? Is my topic realistic/doable? Could we develop a Gantt chart for my research – with readings, assignments built in with my research? Who are the people I can get help from? How can I benefit from the research work?*

Questions that demonstrate initiative on the part of the student focus on clarifying the supervisor’s expectations about the program, research collaboration, and the relationship between student and supervisor. Questions that demonstrate initiative also tend to have a “long-term orientation,” meaning they inquire about how the student may be mentored by the supervisor and gain independence as a scholar. Supervisors may help students take the first step towards demonstrating initiative by asking them to bring three or four good questions to every meeting.

Please see the following page for more mentoring strategies to promote independence and initiative. The suggested mentoring strategies throughout this guide draw on focus group discussions with international graduate students and on the literature on cross-cultural supervision and intercultural communication.



MENTORING STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE INITIATIVE AND INDEPENDENCE

- **Ask students to bring three good questions to every meeting with you.**
- **Explain the meaning and value of original research as soon as students enter the program.**
- **Ask students to set goals for themselves for each term of their program. Review their progress towards goals regularly.**

Goals may focus on research, professional development, teaching or personal development. For example: "I will give three presentations to gain confidence in presenting in English." "I will submit my research for presentation at the Western Research Forum."
- **Discuss who will come up with the research question for the student's projects.**
- **Discuss the division of labour during collaborative research explicitly.**

Clarify which component of the study the student is working on, how it relates to the rest of your research, and how much independence they have in carrying it out. Put the division of labour in writing if necessary. A template letter of understanding is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
- **Encourage students to examine the research critically.**

Ask students to explore alternative approaches to research. Explain repeatedly that constructive criticism of others' work is an important part of scholarship. "Give students permission" to critique the work of well established scholars.
- **Ask students to write a formal review of a journal article as an assignment.**
- **Give students an opportunity to conduct pilot studies on their own.**
- **Recognize and point out when students make original contributions.**

Acknowledge when students make original contributions to the research conducted by the lab group or take initiative in graduate seminars. Public acknowledgement of initiative will encourage international graduate students to take initiative as well.
- **Point to role models from the student's home culture.**

Give students an article in which a scholar from China, India or Egypt critiques the literature particularly well.
- **Encourage innovation and initiative through brainstorming in class.**

Allow students to see the process as you come up with a research question or identify research methods.

POWER AND STATUS

“For me, as an international student from a Confucian culture, usually we respect our supervisor as an authority. So if a supervisor or a professor doesn’t say something like ‘Oh, please feel free to say anything or share anything academically or something about your life, your concerns...’ Without supervisors or professors saying that, I wouldn’t say anything to them. And especially if there was a meeting between a supervisor and me, I am always time sensitive. I’m so afraid I’m bothering them too much. Or I’m taking too much of their time. After two years in Canada, I’ve found that my former supervisor and my PhD supervisor, they’re very friendly and they like to hear if you have any concerns about your life or your studies. But at the beginning I had no idea.”

(Chinese PhD student, Science)

Graduate student-supervisor relationships always involve an inherent power imbalance. International graduate students often perceive a *greater* power imbalance between themselves and their supervisor than Canadian students do, because Canada is what is termed a *low power distance culture*, in which the difference between the social status of the student and the professor is much less than it is the *high power distance cultures* of Africa, South America or East Asia (Hofstede, 1999). In high power distance cultures, deference to authority prevents students from openly disagreeing with the professor and makes it almost impossible for them to say ‘no’ to any requests from the supervisor even if the request is unrealistic (overtime work, deadlines they will not be able to meet).

“I think the hierarchy is always there, in every part of the world, but the kind of relationship could be different. For example, you cannot joke with your supervisor if you are back home [in the Middle East]. You cannot joke with them, but here you can. Here you might hear slang words from your supervisor. [In my culture] because the level is quite high and he is kind of an intellectual personality and it is not expected that he would say something which is not good.”

(PhD student, Science)

Students from high power distance cultures such as India, Mexico or Malaysia often behave in ways that seem overly deferential to Canadians. When they first arrive in Canada, they wait to sit down until told, or stand up each time they say something in class. They may address their supervisor as “Sir” and always use titles before the names of faculty members. Younger faculty who prefer using first names may find students’ continuing use of “Professor Jones” and “Dr. Weir” frustrating, because they feel that the titles create greater distance between them and the students than the informal, collegial relationship they envisioned with their supervisees.

“Students often come from an environment where they are not allowed to criticize teachers, raise questions that could embarrass the teacher or even to correct them if they make a mistake. It is therefore not surprising that they find it hard to put forward their own ideas. However, in the UK postgraduate students are required to demonstrate that they appreciate that other findings are not to be simply accepted and reproduced, and to show that they understand how knowledge in a certain discipline is constructed.”

(Todd, 1996, p 9).

Students from high power distance cultures will also be sensitive to hierarchy among students within the lab. A faculty member who assigns the writing of a publication to a second year PhD student who writes well may not be aware that a fourth year student from a hierarchical culture will be acutely conscious of the fact that they have been ‘passed over’ for working on the publication. Explaining the division of labor in the lab clearly before a project begins or articulating the rationale for why particular students are assigned to tasks can facilitate negotiating such sensitive issues.

Low Power Distance Cultures

- Austria
- Israel
- Denmark
- Norway
- Switzerland
- New Zealand
- Canada
- United States

Medium Power Distance Cultures

- Japan
- Iran
- Eastern European cultures
- Pakistan
- Italy
- Greece

High Power Distance Cultures

- Phillipines
- Mexico
- Venezuela
- India
- Brazil
- France
- West Africa
- China
- Arab Cultures

*Based on Hofstede (1991): Cultures and Organizations; Software of the Mind. Hague: Mouton.
Power Distance Index data available online at www.geert-hofstede.com

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF DEPARTMENTAL STAFF

Another potential for misunderstanding exists in communication between students and departmental staff. Students may not realize that in the relatively egalitarian culture of Canada, a similar level of politeness is expected towards faculty and staff, regardless of their rank. Students will lose great allies if they are not as polite to the graduate assistant as they are to the department chair. The source of this misunderstanding is that in hierarchical societies, senior faculty or department chairs are often afforded preferential treatment or greater deference than administrative staff or junior faculty, so students assume that they need to treat faculty and staff at different levels of the organization differently. Most students, however, easily adapt to Canadian norms of politeness if someone explains the expectations to them, particularly if that person is a high status faculty member such as the dean or department chair. Emphasizing the crucial role that departmental staff play in the students' success can go a long way in helping new students understand Canadian norms of respect and politeness expected in academic settings at all levels of the university.

"Professors are always on top. I find that my supervisor's postdoc student, my interaction with her is very good. I am more comfortable talking to her than talking to my supervisor. If I have any problem, I talk to her, because she is used to giving advice at my level."

(PhD student from the Middle East, Engineering)

Cultural differences in power distance also impact the relationship of international and new Canadian faculty who work with Canadian graduate students. In high power distance societies, it is the "primary task of an employee to follow orders and to please the boss. The subordinate keeps the boss in the loop on all activities, never going over the boss's head, and taking great care not to embarrass the boss" (Laroche, 2007 p. 164). Consider the situation of a faculty member from China, who was raised with the expectation that as a supervisor he would be on top of the hierarchy, working with a Canadian student who takes initiative, makes independent decisions, and consults with other faculty widely, including the department chair or his advisor's senior colleagues. The Chinese faculty member may feel embarrassed and feel that he has lost face when his student goes to other faculty members to discuss research in his lab, while the student is simply trying to network and learn from all faculty members in the department.

High Power Distance Student

- Expects formal communication with supervisor (use of titles, formal language in emails)
- Reluctant to impose on supervisor's time and ask for help
- Asking questions may imply that the "professor didn't do his job properly" so student may ask for help from peers instead
- Tends to agree with the professor as sign of respect
- Expects research direction to be set by professor
- Goes out of his/her way to save face for the professor
- Not used to professors saying "I don't know"
- Will ask frequent open-ended questions such as "What approach would you recommend?"

Low Power Distance Supervisor

- Expects relatively informal communication with students
- Expects student to ask for help when needed
- Expects initiative from students
- Sees student questions as a sign of interest
- Open to ideas, critique of the research group's project from the student
- Expects contribution of original ideas from the student
- Willing to admit if he/she does not know the answer to a question
- Consults students about direction of the research group

Low Power Distance Student

- Takes initiative in class
- Expects direction from supervisor through discussion
- Expects relative independence in his/her work
- Expects to be consulted about decisions that impact his/her research or progress
- Sees questions as a sign of interest and involvement
- Expects faculty to admit if they do not know the answer
- Expects to contribute to research direction of the lab or research group
- Prefers to work with faculty who downplay their status and power

High Power Distance Supervisor

- Expects deference from students
- Does not expect students to take much initiative in class; students are expected to listen and learn
- Expects to tell students what to do
- Expects students to follow instructions closely
- Expects privileges as supervisor
- Expects students to depend on him/her
- May see student questions as challenge to his authority
- Believes that faculty should not show if they do not know the answer to a question

MENTORING STRATEGIES: BRIDGING POWER IMBALANCE

If you are from a lower power distance culture than your students:

- Encourage high power distance students to come up with their own deadlines.

Encourage students to do some background research and explore possible solutions before meeting with you.

- Encourage students to ask specific rather than open-ended questions from you.

Specific question: Will a survey with open-ended questions provide me with richer data than a semi-structured interview?

Open-ended question: What methods do you think would be the best to use?

If you are from a higher power distance culture than your students:

- Ask students to check in with you on a regular basis before they begin new initiatives.
- Give students some smaller projects they may work on independently.

Strategies for both high and low power distance supervisors:

- Clarify how you want students to address you.
- Explain what respect means for you and what types of professional behaviour you expect from students.
- Organize a brown bag lunch or meeting with all the students you supervise (Canadian and international) to discuss their research. This gives international students an opportunity to observe your interaction with Canadian students, which they otherwise rarely do.
- Model how to accept and respond to constructive criticism. For example, if you are discussing a new research direction, give an example of how a student brought up a critical question that changed the direction of your research and how much you valued their contribution. This will encourage students to ask questions about your work and not just nod and agree with everything you say.



HEIGHTENED NEED FOR SAVING FACE

Complicating the supervisor's ability to address the challenges posed by higher power distance is students' differing needs for saving face. Japanese or Korean graduate students have a much higher need to save face than Canadians and are extremely careful to also save face for others. They often go to great lengths not to create a situation that may cause their supervisor to lose face. For example, Chinese students may not ask clarification questions during meetings with their research supervisor, because doing so may indicate that the professor did not explain the issues thoroughly and cause him or her to lose face. The student would rather try to figure out the answer on their own and ask a third party for help before asking for clarification from the supervisor (Watkins and Biggs, 2001; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998).

Similarly, faculty members or TAs from high power distance cultures find it difficult to admit if they do not know the answer to a student's question in class, because in their home culture this would cause them to lose face. They may not realize that in Canada or the U.S. *"it is the sign of a good professor to admit not knowing an answer and then to figure out how to find it"* (Eland, 2001 p. 101). A faculty member at Western reported that her class applauded in appreciation when she admitted that she could not solve an equation in a review session, and many told her that they especially respected her for her openness in the matter.

Students from cultures where the need to save face is high will go to great lengths to maintain a positive face in the eyes of their supervisor. They may not ask for help with research proposals, grant applications or job applications while they are writing them or may ask for help from peers or staff instead of faculty members, because they want to wait until they can present the "finished product" to the supervisor. Ironically, their attempts to save face by not asking for help may result in a less favourable impression in the eyes of their supervisors than if they take the initiative to ask questions and consult along the way.

Again, this is a cultural difference that can be bridged quite easily by discussing expectations with the students early on in the mentoring relationship and clarifying at what stages of readiness they should seek help about research design, literature reviews, and article drafts. Asking students for regular reports of their work, including early drafts and encouraging them to seek feedback from you as well as from others can pre-empt their reluctance to ask for help along the way.



MENTORING STRATEGIES: BEYOND SAVING FACE

Use an inoculation

An inoculation is a training strategy used to prevent a problem by anticipating it and addressing it with students in advance. For example, during new graduate student orientation you may say:

"I know that a lot of grad students are shy about asking questions from their supervisors because they are afraid that the supervisor will get offended or think that you don't know anything, but I'd really like to encourage you to ask questions and clarify what we expect you to accomplish during your program. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have."

Ask students to submit regular reports of their work

Give both positive and constructive negative feedback on progress reports to encourage students to ask questions and check in with you regularly.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Avoid yes/no questions

Yes/no questions tend to corner the person you are communicating with, because it is difficult to say "no" without losing face. Listen for qualifiers that may indicate that the student is saying yes but really meaning no. Asking open-ended questions will help avoid student compliance with requests or deadlines they cannot meet and elicit more realistic responses.

Yes/no questions

- (1) So can you finish the chapter by next week?
- (2) Can you mark these 70 exams by Monday?
- (3) Do you understand the plan?

Likely response:

Yes.

I think I can finish them.

Maybe I can finish them.

I will do my best.

Meaning of the response:

No, I don't think I can finish them but I want to be polite, and I don't want to lose face.

Open-ended, specific questions

- (1) *By when do you think you could complete the next chapter?*
- (2a) *So, Grace, you started marking the exams yesterday, how many exams were you able to go through in a day?*
- (2b) *How many days do you think it will take you to mark the 70 midterms?*
- (3a) *Can you describe the plan and the first three steps you will take to begin the project?*
- (3b) *What will you do if X happens during the experiment?*

High Context Student

- Takes time to get to the point during meetings
- Relationship focused
- May use circular logic
- Evidence for arguments in papers is often implied but not spelled out
- Figures out part of what (s)he is asked to do by supervisor without being explicitly told
- Underexplains
- Writing often perceived as vague by low context communicators
- Likely to avoid direct requests, request through hints instead
- When student has difficulties, (s)he may communicate them by avoiding contact with supervisor
- Expects supervisor to remember the context of previous conversations and will refer to these frequently
- More comfortable with silence than low context supervisor
- Perceptive of nonverbal cues

Low Context Supervisor

- Gets to the point quickly during meetings
- Task focused
- Expects linear logic
- Gives detailed directions
- Overexplains
- Assumes that student will ask for help if (s)he needs it
- May miss subtle nonverbal messages from high context students
- Expects student communication to make sense in itself - without information discussed at previous meetings
- Less comfortable with silence than high context student

The writing of students from high context cultures (Asia, Africa, South America and much of Southern and Eastern Europe) will also be less direct during the first year or two of their academic career in Canada, until they become familiar with Canadian expectations for writing. During the first few months of their studies, students from cultures that value indirectness may use circular as opposed to linear logic in their papers, may not include evidence to support theories or statements that they consider common knowledge, and may leave the thesis sentence to the end of the paper rather than spelling it out in the introduction or at the beginning of each paragraph. As cited in a study on the academic experience of international students, a student from West Africa explains:

"In the French system [used in his country], you pose a challenge to the reader. You don't spoon-feed the reader in the sense that the 'purpose of my dissertation is this. This is what I am going to do.' No. They say that's too crude, not classy. You kind of drag a little bit. You go here, you talk about the moon and the sky. And then you come to the subject matter..."

(Eland, 2001, p. 97).

Canadians generally perceive themselves as quite direct compared to individuals from Asian cultures, while Canadians are perceived as very indirect by some Europeans whose cultures are closer to the "direct" end of the indirect-direct communication continuum.

GIVING FEEDBACK ACROSS CULTURES

In Canadian academia, the expectation is that feedback given to students is objective, constructive, and focused on changeable actions. We tend to cushion negative feedback between positive comments to create a *feedback sandwich*.

The Feedback Sandwich

"The literature review was good, you really looked at the key studies in the field, but you may need to reconsider the hypotheses. I also think that using naturalistic inquiry will not get you rigorous enough results. I think that if you tighten the hypotheses and use a questionnaire instead of interviews, the study will be much stronger. Now, having said that, the questions you proposed to use are very interesting. You have really made a lot of progress on this in the last couple of weeks."

The structure of the feedback sandwich would be quite confusing for students from Germany, the Netherlands, and many parts of Eastern Europe, where feedback is direct and is not softened by a positive introduction. A student who is not used to the structure of the feedback sandwich may ignore the suggestions for revision presented after the word “but” because they see two pieces of positive feedback and one negative, and in their minds the two positives may outweigh the negative (Laroche, 2008). In this situation, the supervisor may need to clarify what action the student needs to take in response to the feedback.

During a presentation at Western, Lionel Laroche, author of *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions* (2003), discussed the impact of cultural differences in feedback scales on the supervisory relationship. Feedback may be represented on a continuum from unacceptable, slightly negative, neutral, and positive to excellent. One of the challenges of giving feedback across cultures is that the width of each of these zones varies both from person to person and from culture to culture. What is positive to the supervisor may still be in the neutral zone for the student, and what is slightly negative to the supervisor may sound really harsh to the student.

For example, a Canadian supervisor’s slightly negative feedback about the thesis of a Chinese student may come across as quite harsh, because it falls into the student’s “unacceptable” zone. The supervisor may try to communicate to the student that he needs to improve his writing skills in order to be able to publish when he says: *“The design of your experiment is really innovative, but your writing really needs some work. At the moment, this paper would not be acceptable in an academic journal. I think that you should take a course on scientific writing.”*

In this example, the supervisor may see writing as a skill that can be learned and suggests that the student take steps to acquire this critical skill. The student, however, may infer a much more negative message: *“My writing is unacceptable and can’t be published. He is telling me that I don’t belong in the program. Maybe I should quit the PhD.”*

Given the differences in the location of the message on each person’s cultural and personal feedback scale, it would be important for the supervisor to cushion the message and explain that learning to write is a part of graduate education that everyone must learn. At the same time, it would also be important for the student to ask for clarification about the quality of writing expected in his program. For more examples of feedback scales and strategies for giving feedback across cultures, see *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions* (Laroche, 2003) in the Teaching Support Centre library.



MENTORING STRATEGIES FOR THE DIRECTNESS-INDIRECTNESS DIVIDE

- **Be very specific in feedback on student writing.** “You only state your thesis at the end of the paper. It would help the reader if you started with it instead” will help students adapt more than saying “It takes you too long to get to the point, the paper is vague.”
- **Encourage students to overexplain in their first papers,** and then help them find balance between overexplaining and underexplaining as you give them feedback on their writing.
- **Refer students to readings on high and low context cultures.** A concise description of these cultural dimensions is available at the SuccessInAcademia.ca website. Originally created for international faculty who are new to Canada, they provide a thorough overview of how directness and indirectness impact teaching and learning. (Weblinks are listed under References as Engelking, 2007 and Germain-Rutherford et al 2006).
- **Make a conscious effort to observe the body language of new students** if you are from a low context culture. For example, if a student is asked, “Are you comfortable making the measurements with the new microscope all by yourself?” and you observe a long pause before the student answers “yes,” the pause may indicate hesitation and suggest that he or she is really not comfortable working with the new equipment alone.

RULE FOLLOWING

Completing a graduate degree involves recognizing, deciphering and following a myriad of rules and regulations. The prevailing assumption in Canadian culture is that rules and instructions are reasonable and should be followed. Most North Americans also believe that rules should apply the same way to everyone (Nisbett, 2004).

The perception of rules by international students may differ from this in two ways. First, students from post-communist societies often believe that only a selected set of rules need to be followed. The reason for this belief is that in countries with totalitarian regimes, unreasonable rules control every aspect of life. As a result, individuals regard rules as guidelines to be followed only when necessary but ignored when possible. In most totalitarian societies, one can only survive by breaking at least some of the rules. Before students from such cultures learn about Canadian expectations for rule following, they may not take program regulations at face value, unless the graduate chair and faculty members in the department explain the consequences of not meeting program deadlines or requirements.



The second way in which perception of rules differs is that in Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, students expect to receive individual consideration that takes into account the context. This means that while rules may theoretically apply to everyone, people often make exceptions. Applying rules to all without considering their individual situation is seen as rigid or cruel. So in Middle Eastern cultures, for example, declaring that “the class is full” basically opens the door for negotiation to get into the class. In this culture “no” is rarely considered absolute, and exceptions to rules are frequently made based on consideration of individual cases (Nydell, 2002).

MENTORING STRATEGIES – RULE FOLLOWING

Be explicit about which rules are set in stone in order to help students navigate institutional policies. For example, the expectation to complete a research ethics protocol for studies involving human subjects is new to many international graduate students, and they may not know that they absolutely cannot begin to collect data while they are waiting for ethics approval.

Also, explain which rules or deadlines may be flexible.

International students may not be aware that they could get an incomplete grade in a course for medical or compassionate reasons. Students have been known to abandon their entire graduate program, because they were unable to hand in a course paper on time due to illness or death in their family.

Explain the possible consequences of not following rules to students early on in the program. For example:

“The editor at the XY journal will not read your manuscript if the references are not in APA format.”

“In order to receive a TA position, you need to have a valid student permit on file with the payroll office. If your student permit is not submitted before the first day of class, you will not be able to start teaching, and you cannot get paid.”

APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

Common reasons for conflict between supervisors and students

In a study of conflict between international graduate students and their supervisors, Adrian-Taylor, Noels and Tischler (2007) found that students and faculty cited different issues as main sources of conflict in these relationships. Among the students, the most frequently cited causes of conflict were lack of openness, lack of feedback, lack of support or guidance from the supervisor, different expectations about how close or how personal the student-supervisor relationship should be, and disrespect from the supervisor. Among faculty, the most frequently cited sources of conflict were: the student cannot write, understand and speak English adequately; the student does not have adequate research skills; and the student is too dependent on the supervisor.

As disagreements over workload, expectations or other academic issues are likely to arise between students and their mentors over the course of a relationship that lasts for several years, it is a good idea to discuss how you would like your students to address any concerns they may have. Unless the expectations for resolving disagreements are clear, cultural differences in the way we resolve disagreements could actually aggravate the original issue.

Approaches to conflict vary widely across cultures

In Canada, we expect individuals to address workplace disagreements in a calm and rational manner. Communication during conflict tends to be relatively direct. "In a conflict situation, people who favor *direct communication* tend to be to the point, open and face to face with their issues. The communication is often impersonal, with the focus being on the issues rather than on the personalities. People on the outside of the conflict are expected to stay outside, except in exceptional circumstances" (Laroche and Rutherford, 2007, p. 141). In North American and Northern European cultures, individuals who can control their emotions and maintain their composure during workplace disagreements are regarded positively. Expressing strong emotions (losing one's temper or crying) during conflict at work may be seen as a sign of weakness, immaturity or mental instability.

"Affective Cultures"

(Where it is more common to express being upset at work)

- Egypt
- Spain
- Cuba
- Venezuela
- Russia
- France
- Saudi Arabia

Cultures "In Between"

- Switzerland
- Germany
- U.S.A.
- Czech Republic
- Hungary
- Belgium
- Brazil

"Neutral Cultures"

(Where it is less common to express being upset at work)

- Ethiopia
- Japan
- Hong Kong
- New Zealand
- China
- India
- Canada

*Adapted from Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (1998). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Global Business*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Students from the Middle East, Southern and Eastern Europe or Latin America are often surprised by how relatively “reserved” and calm Canadians appear during conflict situations. This is because in their cultures the expression of emotions during conflict is acceptable and is seen as a sign of being authentic, passionate, and committed to finding a resolution (Hammer, 2005). Ways of approaching workplace disagreements in these cultures differ from the North American pattern in a number of ways.

- Cultures of the Middle East use mediators and express their emotions in the midst of conflict more frequently than North Americans. In a conflict between a student and supervisor, the student may try to ask another faculty member to advocate on their behalf as the mediator. Mediators are not expected to be neutral.
- Eastern Europeans approach conflict fairly directly. Emotions are expressed relatively openly. Russians, for example, have been found to prefer resolving workplace disagreements between colleagues at an equal level in the organization directly, without involving the supervisor, in contrast with Americans, who prefer to resolve workplace disagreements through the supervisor rather than through direct confrontation (Dimitrov, 2004).
- The primary conflict management strategy in Asian cultures is avoidance. In the words of intercultural communication scholar Stella Ting-Toomey, “A calculated degree of vagueness and circumlocution are typically employed when tensions and anxieties mount” (1985, p. 80). Saving face is extremely important, and less emotion is expressed than in North America.

MENTORING STRATEGIES FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CONFLICT STYLES

Encourage students to bring concerns to you directly, ask frequent questions, and discuss when it is appropriate for them to discuss your working relationship with colleagues in the department and when it is not.

If you are from a culture that values emotional restraint during conflict, be cautious about assigning meaning to students’ gestures or tone of voice. You are likely to attribute greater intensity to their questions or complaints than they intended. Try to first describe what happened between you and the student, then work to interpret it before evaluating (i.e., forming a judgment).

If you are from a culture that values open expression of emotion, be cautious about assigning meaning to a student’s lack of emotional expression. They may appear detached or calm when in fact they are experiencing anxiety or frustration.

Case Study: The TA and the Department Chair

To illustrate how cultural differences in conflict styles may impact the supervisor-student relationship, think about how you would respond if one of your teaching assistants, feeling that he is not able to handle all the work you are assigning him in your course, approached your department chair directly instead of bringing up the issue with you. The student may express concern over the fact he is approaching his allotted 140 hours of work for the term and would not be able to help with end of term marking in your class.

He may not mention this to you directly, so if you are a direct communicator who prefers to resolve disagreements face to face, you are likely to feel betrayed by his actions. If the student had brought up his concern about workload to you, you would have been willing to work out an arrangement and suggest strategies for reducing the amount of time he spends on TA duties each week.

Very likely, the student did not intend to betray you – he was simply seeking a mediator to advocate for him in the discussion with you. If he is from a culture where mediators are used, he is unlikely to realize that by talking directly to the chair (likely also a direct communicator), he created the impression that you are not able to resolve minor disagreements with your students.

Miscommunication abounds at many levels in the case above. The student, the faculty member, and the department chair all assign meaning to each other's actions that were not intended and were incorrect. Almost all of these misunderstandings can be traced back to our assumptions about how we expect others to respond to situations that involve disagreement. The student may have assumed that speaking to the faculty member's supervisor is the "proper channel" for addressing a workload issue, while both the chair and the faculty member would expect such discussions to take place between the student and his immediate supervisor, the faculty member. The chair also makes an incorrect attribution by assuming that a student would only consult him if discussion with the faculty member had failed. The following mentoring strategies may help prevent conflicts similar to those in the case study from occurring.

MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SPHERE

“Back home, the relationship was like father and son. When my father passed away, I didn’t see my supervisor for a period of time, and when he saw me, he knew something was wrong. But here, I have difficulty. I need somebody to look after me. I won’t say dependent, because I need to be independent, but I’m seeking a new experience and you have to give me some guidelines if I did something wrong. But don’t leave me alone until I waste my time, and then [say] ‘Oh, that’s wrong!’”

(PhD student from the Middle East, Engineering)

How close should the relationship between graduate students and their mentors be? Is it a solely professional relationship, or can it involve friendship between the student and the faculty member? Faculty members across campus hold a wide variety of views on this question. Some feel that socializing with their graduate students is an important part of the mentoring relationship and feel comfortable spending Friday afternoon with them at the Grad Club, while others choose to keep personal and professional relationships separate and are concerned about setting clear boundaries between the two for their students.

Hockey (1996) argues that relationships during graduate supervision fall into three main categories. In **informal relationships** the notion of a contractual agreement and trust are of equal importance. In **comradeship**, trust is more important than the contract, while in a solely **professional relationship**, the contract becomes more important than trust.

There are very few cultures in the world where the separation of personal and professional life is as clear and as expected as it is in North America. Compared to European and Asian cultures, Americans and Canadians perceive a more clearly delineated boundary between their professional and personal lives. They are more likely to socialize separately with their work friends and personal friends, and work relationships and friendships overlap less frequently than in many other cultures around the world (Kim, 2001). Supervisory relationships tend to fall into the formal or professional category more often than into the comradeship category, although they may also be informal in the sense that both trust and contractual agreement are equally important in them.

Students from Central America and Mexico, on the other hand, report that they frequently have coffee with their professors and spend time together after class. African students view their professors as “extended family members,” who have a “duty to take care of their students” (Eland, 2001 p. 99), so they expect a deep personal relationship with their mentors. In a number of cultures, faculty supervisors provide guidance to students in both personal and academic matters, as they are regarded as a mentor and almost as a parent figure. Relationships between Chinese supervisors and graduate students are also



close and personal (Blunt and Li, 1998). These relationships are closer to the comradeship category in Hockey's typology.

As a result, students from these cultures are more likely to regard the faculty supervisor as their main contact and link to Canadian culture and may expect direction from their supervisor in settling in Canada or applying for residency. Students who consider the supervisor as a parent-figure have been known to ask for a loan or ask to borrow a car from faculty members.

On the other side of this equation is students' unwavering dedication to their supervisors' work. Students from relationship oriented cultures will go out of their way to fulfill all of their supervisors' requests, and go above and beyond expectations to complete research projects by staying overtime or giving up personal plans to support their supervisors. Not only will they ask for help, but they will also offer it. For example, upon hearing that his professor is moving, a student from a relationship oriented culture is likely to offer help immediately and may bring along friends to help.

MENTORING STRATEGIES – MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES

Explain the boundaries between professional and personal to your new students if this is important to you.

For example, you might say: "On Tuesdays I am working from home. I will give you my home phone number, so you can call me in case there is an emergency in the lab, but please only call me between 8 am and 5 pm. After 5, I am spending time with my family and will not take calls."

Be specific about the times when you are available for consultation, especially if you frequently work from your home office.

For many graduate students, writing time and personal time blend completely, and in the fog of the literature review they may forget that it is the day before Christmas or a holiday weekend.

TIME MANAGEMENT

In North America, there is a prevailing philosophy that "time is money." Punctuality and effective time management are highly valued, to the extent that being 10 minutes late for a job interview or corporate meeting is considered a major *faux pas*. This heightened concern with the efficient use of time is not shared by all cultures around the world, although the Germans and Swiss have been known to outdo even Americans and Canadians in their emphasis on punctuality (Hall, 1991). Students from Mexico and other parts of Latin America would only consider themselves late if they arrived at a meeting 30 or 40 minutes past the appointed time (Laroche and Rutherford, 2007), and would not normally rush if they were 5-10 minutes late for class.



As you mentor graduate students, it is important to communicate your expectations for meeting deadlines, arriving at their tutorial on time or about letting you know if they are going to be more than 15 minutes late for a meeting with you. Also let students know if you are flexible with your own use of time. By explaining your expectations, you help students learn about the norms of the Canadian workplace regarding time management - knowledge that will serve them well whether they decide to remain in academia or pursue a career in industry.

Communicating your expectations about the times when students may stop by your office with questions is also important. You may have students who stop by your office almost daily just to say hello and chat (for as long as 30-40 minutes), without asking specific questions. These students were probably raised in polychronic cultures in which time is flexible and a lot more time is spent on maintaining interpersonal relationships than in the monochronic cultures like Canada (Hall, 1991). Students from polychronic cultures are not trying to hold up your work; they are simply trying to keep in touch and get to know you more. Students from Latin American cultures, the Middle East or some parts of South Asia may represent this pattern. One graduate school administrator I spoke with was extremely frustrated by a group of Nepali students who, after dropping off some forms in her office, returned every day to check on the progress of her work on them, even though she explained to them that she would get back to them in two weeks. After speaking with the students longer, she realized that they were not trying to rush her in her work; they just wanted to get to know her and maintain a good relationship with her, because she was someone who had significant decision-making authority over their program progress.

“Monochronic Cultures”

- *Schedules are important*
- *Task oriented*
- *Emphasis on promptness*

- **Northern Europe**
- **United States**
- **Germany**
- **Canada**

“Polychronic Cultures”

- *Schedules are flexible*
- *Relationship oriented*
- *Plans change often and easily*

- **Southern Europe**
- **Latin America**
- **Middle East**
- **France**

MENTORING STRATEGIES FOR TIME MANAGEMENT

Post your schedule on the office door.

Include your research writing time and drop-in question time in it. Students will respect your writing time if they know when they can drop by to ask questions.

Suggest that students email their questions to you a day or a few hours before your regular meetings.

Explain to students if you would like them to call and let you know if they expect to be a few minutes late for a meeting with you.

Let students know how much time you have for your meetings with them.

They will usually assume that you are really busy and may only have 15 minutes with them, when discussing their thesis proposal may really need an hour.

SILENCE AND TALK

The amount of silence we feel comfortable with during conversation also varies significantly across cultures. For instance, if a Japanese student sits silently in your office after you have said something, it may not mean that he does not know what to say or that he is displeased with the suggestion you have made about his first dissertation chapter. Rather, he may simply be reflecting on what you have said without rushing to express his opinion.

Silence has different meanings across cultures. Margaret Kiley's (1998) research with Indonesian students in Australia found that Indonesian students expected faculty to call students to report to them from time to time.

“On the other hand, many supervisors in Australia adopt the attitude “If you have a problem, come and see me” “And if I don’t hear from you, I’ll assume everything is OK.” Students’ interpretation of silence, on the other hand, is completely the opposite: “Like here [in Australia] if you don’t ask anything then it means that everything is OK, but in Indonesia it means that everything is wrong.”

(Kiley, 1998, p. 197).

Another pattern that faculty are often surprised by is the way students from the Middle East, or from French speaking backgrounds express their enthusiasm and interest in a topic. Wieland's research (1997) found that French speakers often expressed interest and involvement in a conversation by finishing what the other person said and starting to speak even before the other person stopped explaining their point in order to show that they understood where the other person was going. This was perceived as interruption, and thus interpreted as impolite by English speakers, who expect a second or two of silence before taking turns in a conversation, and find interruption distracting. They will apologize and say "I'm sorry – go ahead" "No, go ahead" when encountering this situation, and leave the situation feeling uncomfortable.

So occasionally, let silences be, but also explain to students how their enthusiasm and interruptions may be perceived by Canadians who are not aware of this cultural difference.

BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN GRADUATE STUDENT AND MENTOR

"As an international graduate student, I feel more dependent on my supervisor. When thinking about building my committee, I don't have the resources here, and I'm more dependent on what she's recommending to me rather than bringing ideas on my own, or bringing people myself. What I need more as an international student is more of this kind of global guidance."

(European PhD student, Social Science)

There are significant differences in the way individuals approach new collaborative relationships and build trust. These differences are based on gender, cultural background, learning style, level of extroversion or introversion, previous experience, and many other factors. While I cannot possibly address all of those here, one interesting difference stands out. A few years ago, when I was doing research about the cultural adaptation of Eastern Europeans in the United States, one of the women graduate students in the study explained that the most salient cultural difference for her was in the level of trust Americans approached new relationships with. She noticed that in the U.S. Midwest, the people she met at the university approached new acquaintances with trust and continued to trust new acquaintances or students until something happened that would give them a reason not to trust the new acquaintance anymore. There is a strong emphasis on "giving people the benefit of the doubt" in North American culture, and a similar pattern can be observed in Canada. By contrast, she explained that in her culture, people tend to approach new relationships with distrust (i.e., you distrust all strangers and new acquaintances), until they demonstrate that they can be trusted. She felt that in her culture one had to work really hard in the initial phases of a relationship with a faculty member in order to gain their trust, whereas in the U.S. (at least in the Midwest where the study was conducted), trust and good intentions were assumed and granted until the person proved unworthy of that trust.

Another student explained the implications of the same cultural difference for establishing friendships and working relationships in Europe and North America using a creative metaphor. He compared Americans and Canadians to a peach: soft on the outside, but with a hard pit in the middle – meaning that they are easy to get to know at first through chatting and casual conversation, but as the relationship progresses, one hits the core of the individual’s personality that is not revealed very easily. By contrast, he explained that Europeans were similar to a walnut – a hard shell to crack on the outside, but soft in the middle – meaning that Europeans may appear less friendly at first and may distrust new acquaintances, but once their trust is gained, they reveal all of themselves in the relationship and hold back little.

MENTORING IMPLICATIONS

The implications of cultural differences in trust-building for the mentoring relationship are that students from “distrust first” cultures are likely to take several months to warm up to the relationship with their advisor and self-disclose more information about their background and experience, while students from “trust first” cultures are likely to be more forthcoming about their background, their concerns, and their research ideas from the very beginning.

Helping International Graduate Students Overcome Culture Shock

“The other thing is that coming to a new place, it’s always important that professors get to know a little bit more about the student and the background and what happens out there, rather than expecting a student from a different culture, a different country to just act the same way.”

(International PhD student, Education)

International students who are new to Canada when they enter their graduate program (that is, they come to Western straight from Russia, Kenya or Argentina and have not lived in Canada before) will experience culture shock during their first 6-12 months in the country. Culture shock is a psychological response to living in a new environment in which everything is unfamiliar, from food through rules of casual conversation to the way one participates in class discussion. During their first few months students experience a lot of uncertainty about how to behave, and they often lack a supportive social network that would help them cope with it (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001).

The symptoms and intensity of culture shock vary from one person to another. Some of the typical symptoms are fatigue, homesickness, loneliness, lack of interest in trying new things, inability to work effectively, either too little or too much sleep, an exaggerated need for cleanliness, irritability, strong sense of loyalty to home culture, unexplainable crying, overeating or loss of appetite, and unexplainable aches and pains (Kohls, 1995).

Culture shock tends to be worst around three months after arrival, and then again around six months after arrival. These are also the points at which new graduate students consider abandoning their program most often. Research finds that a sense of humour, low goal orientation, flexibility and the ability to make mistakes can help newcomers adapt to the culture and overcome culture shock (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001).

During their first year, students will gradually learn the norms and expectations of their department, the university and Canadian culture. They become more comfortable in daily interaction and feel more competent in communicating in their second language in the academic context. By the end of their first year, they should develop the ability to communicate quite competently, but they will occasionally make mistakes and will continue to benefit from mentoring and support throughout their program.

New Canadian permanent residents face the same challenges as international students. Some students do not identify themselves as “international,” because they arrive in Canada as permanent residents, but if they arrived directly from their home country at the beginning of the school year, they will face the same challenges as an international student on a visa or study permit.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COPE WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Ask your new students about how long they have been in Canada so you can anticipate if and when they may experience culture shock. Check in and ask how they are coping, and if necessary, refer them to International Student Services for support and counseling.

Help new students establish a social network. Encourage them to spend time with other grad students, get involved with extracurricular activities, and participate in social events offered by International Student Services. Introduce your students to scholars at conferences and encourage them to meet other faculty in the department.

Encourage students to find a balance between spending time with co-nationals and Canadians or other international students.

Do not assign a new Chinese student to a lab in which they will only meet other Chinese students. While it may seem that this makes their job easier, it actually hinders their learning and adaptation, because they will have little opportunity to interact with others in English.



Encourage research collaboration across cultures: ask students to change lab partners or research collaborators periodically. Create groups of three rather than groups of two if one of the students still needs language support from someone from their own culture. Increase the cultural distance of research partners gradually. For example, you may consider assigning a conservative Muslim female student to work with a female lab partner for a couple of months before asking her to work with a male student.

Articulate expectations clearly - this will help reduce the amount of uncertainty students are experiencing and may help alleviate their culture shock.

Do not set overly ambitious goals for the student's first year.

Low goal orientation has been found to be an important coping strategy during culture shock (Kohls, 1995).

Conclusion

"[An effective mentor is] somebody who can do something or say something that will encourage you to open your heart, or your mind."

(Chinese PhD student, Science)

By reading this guide, you have already made a huge leap forward in your role as a mentor across cultures. You are aware of the key cultural differences that influence your relationship with your students. At the moment, the amount of cultural variation you have learned about seems overwhelming. You are probably wondering how you can possibly survive your next meeting with one of your students without communicating something you did not intend. You will survive the next meeting, as you have survived many meetings in the past.

Beyond trying out the mentoring strategies throughout the guide, knowledge about cultural differences in communication may help you in two main ways. First, you may question the attributions you find yourself making about students' ways of communicating and look for alternative explanations. For example, if you do not hear from one of your students for a couple of months, you may assume that all is going well, and they are busy writing the methods chapter of their thesis at home. At the same time, you may question whether silence means that all is well, or whether it could mean that the student is really struggling with the methods chapter. Both explanations are possible. A 10-word email saying "I just wanted to ask how writing was going" may help answer the question and help prevent a student from quitting the program.

The second way in which knowledge about cultural differences in communication may help you work with international graduate students is that it gives you a greater repertoire of communication strategies to use. If you feel that the "sandwich" approach to giving students feedback on their writing is not heard, you may want to try and communicate it more directly.



Whether you are mentoring your first international student or your 50th, the Teaching Support Centre can support you along your journey towards becoming an effective communicator and mentor across cultures. Our faculty associates or educational developers frequently lead workshops, facilitate focus groups and help create learning communities to address the discipline-specific needs of departments or faculties.

Departments with a large number of international students may benefit from:

- (1) discussing the main cultural differences that influence communication in the department, and sharing strategies that faculty have found to bridge them.
- (2) using the case studies at the end of this guide as a starting point for discussion about the impact of cultural differences on graduate supervision.
- (3) organizing an informal gathering for international students and encouraging them to share the strategies they have used to bridge cultural differences in communication. The learning community may include only students or both students and faculty.
- (4) documenting discipline-specific expectations for communication in their program. Faculty may brainstorm and articulate unspoken norms for giving presentations, handling disagreements between supervisors and students, and then make these available to all students and faculty in the program.

Appendix 1: Case Studies

Life is always more complicated than theory. The following case studies below seek to illustrate how theories about communicating across cultures in the supervisory relationship may look in real life contexts. You may use the case studies for self study or as the starting point for conversations about supervision across cultures in your lab or in your department. Discussion questions are included after each scenario. A list of possible explanations for each scenario appears later in the appendix, after the case studies.

When using the case studies, allow at least 15 minutes for discussion of the case in small groups of 2-4 people, then ask each group to share some of the questions they have discussed. Debrief by asking the whole group about how the individuals in the case might have felt, what happened, what we can learn from the case, or ask “what if” questions that explore how one’s potential response to the situation would change if the parameters of the story were different (e.g., the genders of the supervisor and student were reversed or if the student was from another culture).

During the discussion, encourage participants to first **describe** what happened in non-evaluative terms, then **interpret** what the meaning of characters’ actions may have been and why they may have communicated in particular ways, and to avoid the propensity to **evaluate** characters’ actions until more information is gathered about their choices through describing and interpreting. Using the Describe/Interpret/Evaluate approach will encourage participants to first seek to understand the perspective of each of the characters before passing judgment based on their own culture’s perspective.

Case Study 1: Writing for publication

Jun Zhang is a third-year PhD student in Biology from Beijing, China, working in the lab of Dr. Cory Black. Jun has completed all of her coursework in the program with excellent marks and passed her comprehensive exams successfully. In Dr. Black's lab, she is thorough and reliable, and completes all the experiments he asks her to do quickly and efficiently. When Dr. Black encouraged her to write up one of the experiments for publication, she began writing and gave him a draft a few weeks later. The draft had several grammar problems and was quite unclear, so Dr. Black asked her to seek help at the Writing Support Centre so she could learn to write well enough for publication. She attends a writing course and brings in a second draft a couple of months later. The draft is better, but still not ready for publication. Dr. Black suggests a number of concrete changes, growing slightly impatient during the meeting. "Writing well is really important if you want to succeed in this discipline. We need to move on with the new phase of the study. Why don't you put writing aside for a month, and work on the new experiments instead," he tells Jun.

While waiting for Jun to improve her writing skills, Dr. Black asks Katie, a native speaker in the lab in her second year in the PhD program to take on writing up the experiment and send it for publication at the journal of the Canadian Biology Association. Katie's article is accepted for publication, and Dr. Black congratulates her in front of the lab group. Jun appears really confused. She leaves the lab early that day. When Jun and Katie complete the next round of experiments, Dr. Black thanks Jun for her work, and discusses the next phase of tests with her, then turns to Katie and asks whether she would be willing to write up the results for publication. Jun asks Dr. Black for a few days off to visit her friends in Vancouver. While there, she sends an email to Dr. Black explaining that she received a job offer from a relative in British Columbia and will stay there to work instead of returning to complete her PhD program.

1. Why do you think Jun decided to leave the PhD program?
2. What did Dr. Black's actions unintentionally communicate to Jun?
3. How else could Dr. Black have balanced his needs for publishing research quickly and Jun's need to learn to write well for publication?

Turn to the end of the appendix for a list of possible explanations.

Case Study 2: Job applications

Akiko is a second-year master's student in Pharmacology. She was born and raised in Japan and arrived in Canada approximately 18 months ago. Upon arriving at the university, she was very happy to find that there were two other Japanese students in her program from her university back home, and that there was a sizable Japanese community on campus. As she is only a few months from graduation, and her thesis research is going well, Akiko decides to apply for jobs at a few Canadian companies to gain experience in her field for a year or two before she returns to Japan. She makes an appointment with her advisor, Dr. Bailey, to discuss the job application process.

First they chat for a few minutes, Dr. Bailey inquires about Akiko's visit with her family over Christmas.

"So... I wanted to talk to you about applying for jobs at a few companies..." says Akiko. "Sure" says Dr. Bailey. "It is a good idea to start early."

"I put together a resume and I have been considering three companies" says Akiko. "Where are you planning to apply?" asks Dr. Bailey. They chat about the companies for a few minutes. "The deadline for most of the job postings is March 1", says Akiko. So I am hoping to send the packages by the middle of February."

"That's great!" says Dr. Bailey. Several seconds of silence follow. Akiko smiles, but doesn't say anything. Dr. Bailey is getting uncomfortable. It seems to her that the meeting has finished, but Akiko is not leaving.

"So how has your research been going?" Akiko asks after a long pause.

"I've been really busy. Training the new research assistants has been taking a lot of time, and I'm also working on my tenure application, so it is super hectic these days. But I'm really glad you were able to stop by and tell me about your job application plans. Best of luck with the application. Let me know how it turns out."

Akiko leaves Dr. Bailey's office confused and disappointed. She is wondering why Dr. Bailey is reluctant to support her in her job applications.

1. Why did Akiko go to see Dr. Bailey? What did she really ask for?
2. What did Dr. Bailey's last comment communicate to Akiko?
3. How could they work together to clarify Akiko's needs?

Turn to the end of the appendix for a list of possible explanations.

Case Study 3: Compliments

Karen is a young Assistant Professor in Modern Languages. Fernando is a new graduate student from Colombia in her comparative literature class. He is friendly and engaging during class, but often arrives a bit late and stays after class to chat with other students and with Karen. On a couple of occasions he has offered to help Karen carry her books or a big pile of exams back to her office, which she has gratefully accepted. Last week Fernando complimented Karen on her dress, saying, "You look really elegant today. Your dress reminds me of the style of one of the most famous actresses in Bogota." At first Karen didn't think much of the comment, but when the following week Fernando sent her an email and invited her to join him and some of the other Colombian students from the department to see a music group visiting from Bogota, Karen became concerned. Looking back on the last few weeks, she started to see a pattern and began wondering whether he might have misunderstood her friendliness towards him in class.

1. What do you think supervisor-student relationships are like in Fernando's culture?
2. Is there a misunderstanding and if so, what are its causes?
3. What could Karen do to clarify her expectations to Fernando?

Turn to the end of the appendix for a list of possible explanations.

Possible Explanations

CASE STUDY 1: WRITING FOR PUBLICATION

Jun is from a high context culture in which indirectness and implication are used frequently. Dr. Black is from a low context culture in which the main channel of communication is verbal, and messages are direct and explicit.

Dr. Black encouraged Jun to learn to write better for publication, but didn't realize that by giving the same writing project to Katie, who is younger than Jun and a year behind her in the program, and congratulating Katie in front of the lab group, he may have communicated to Jun that he is disappointed in her for not being able to write well enough. Jun may interpret his actions as an indirect way of letting her know that she does not belong in the program, so in order to save face for all, she decided to leave. Saying that she received a job offer was probably a strategy to save face as well.

Jun is more sensitive to status differences among students, so the fact that a younger student is given a more challenging assignment is meaningful to her, while for Dr. Black it was likely a very utilitarian decision. Had he explained when Jun would again get a chance to write for publication or had he given her opportunities earlier, she could have completed the program successfully.

CASE STUDY 2: JOB APPLICATIONS

The main cultural difference in this case study is directness and indirectness. Akiko does not want to ask for a letter of recommendation directly from Dr. Bailey, because she does not want to inconvenience her in case she is too busy or in case she does not want to write a letter – so Dr. Bailey would not have to say no to her request. Dr. Bailey is probably wondering why Akiko wants to discuss the job applications with her if she is not asking for a recommendation. One strategy for the professor would be to offer to write a letter during the course of the conversation.

At the end of the conversation Akiko stalls and asks about Dr. Bailey's work as a way of extending the conversation. She does not want to leave, because she is still hoping that Dr. Bailey will offer to support her applications. When the professor starts to talk about how busy she has been, Akiko takes her response as an indication that she will not write a letter of recommendation – although this was probably not the intended message.

CASE STUDY 3: COMPLIMENTS

Supervisory relationships in Fernando's culture fall closer to the 'comradeship' model in Hockey's (1996) typology: they are informal and friendly. In his culture, gender roles are also more separate than in Canada, and as a result it is considered polite for men to help women (especially women in high status positions, such as the professor) with carrying books or heavy objects. It is also acceptable and respectful in his culture to compliment women on their physical appearance or dress, and compliments are not seen as a sign of attraction (Dimitrov, 2004). In Karen's culture, male and female roles are less separate, and Fernando's gestures of politeness may be misinterpreted as a sign of romantic interest. It is likely that Karen expects either an informal or a professional relationship with her students and does not often socialize with them outside of class. Karen could either address the situation indirectly and just decline the invitation, or she could address it directly, and explain to Fernando that going to the concert with Fernando and his friends may be misinterpreted by faculty or students in the department as favouritism.

Appendix 2:

Resources at Western

Western Guide to Graduate Supervision (2008) by Elizabeth Skarakis-Doyle and Gayle McIntyre

Western Guide to Graduate Supervision (2008) addresses the supervision of graduate students in general, and focuses on best practices in mentoring, promoting student progress and clarifying expectations in the supervisor-student relationship. The guide contains tips and strategies from experienced supervisors at Western, as well as sample supervisory agreements, a role clarification rating scale and other forms that may help faculty members in initiating a dialogue with their students about expectations for the mentoring relationship. Available online at www.uwo.ca/tsc/gradsupervision.html

Mentorship in Academia (2008), by Donald Cartwright introduces multiple approaches to mentoring new faculty and provides resources for both mentors and mentees.

WORKSHOPS FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

Each year, the TSC's Faculty Associate on Graduate Supervision facilitates workshops for faculty on various aspects of the supervisory relationship, including resolving conflict with graduate students, creating effective supervisory agreements, supervising across cultures, and building trust between supervisor and mentees. Workshops for students address strategies for getting mentored and building a productive relationship with their supervisors. For current offerings, please check the TSC website at www.uwo.ca/tsc

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GRADUATE SUPERVISION RESOURCES ON THE TSC WEBSITE

Resources for faculty

- www.uwo.ca/tsc/gradsupervision.html
(Includes a link to the SGPS template letter of understanding)

Resources for students on mentoring and supervision

- grad.uwo.ca/360
- [www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources%20\(graduate%20students\).html](http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources%20(graduate%20students).html)

TEACHING SUPPORT CENTRE COURSES FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS (SELECTED)

- Communication in the Canadian Classroom
- Pronunciation in the Canadian Classroom
- The Language of Teaching in the Sciences/Engineering
- International TA Day
- Pathways to Canadian Academia
- Communication Strategies for International Graduate Students: Surviving and Thriving in Canadian Academia (Online handbook for international graduate students and their mentors)

THE TSC LIBRARY

Our library houses a number of books on cultures around the world, including France, Russia, Germany, China, the Arab world, Spain.

Cultural Detectives

The TSC library includes a series of 20- to 30-page reference materials with information about norms and values in the cultures where the majority of Western's international students come from. Each cultural detective includes case studies that highlight challenging communication situations involving people from the culture, with suggested solutions, interpretation and a list of values that are central in the culture. Our current list of Cultural Detectives includes:

Arab Gulf, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Canada, China, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Islam, Israel, Japan, India, Oceania, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland, Women, USA, New Zealand.

ARTICLES ON ACADEMIC CULTURE SHOCK

Refer your new students to articles on recognizing and coping with academic culture shock in University Affairs:

Dimitrov, N. (2008). How to survive the first year of graduate school. Part I. Recognizing the five stages of academic culture shock. Part II. Five practical tips to help you beat academic culture shock

www.universityaffairs.ca/2008/11/03/how-to-survive-your-first-year-of-graduate-school-part-1.aspx

www.universityaffairs.ca/2008/11/17/how-to-survive-your-first-year-of-graduate-school-part-2.aspx

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT SERVICES PROGRAMS FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

- International Student Services offers a variety of programs to help students adapt to life in Canada, including peer mentoring, social events, conversation circles, and an international graduate student welcome reception. For more information, go to www.sds.uwo.ca/int

ISS Programs include:

- » International Student Services Reception and Orientation Service
 - » International Graduate Student Information Night
 - » Welcome Reception for International Students
 - » Welcome Dinner for New International Graduate Students
 - » How To Succeed In Graduate School: Key Strategies For International Students
 - » English Conversation Program
 - » International Peer Connection Program (IPC)
 - » Counseling and Advising services
 - » Assistance with Immigration, SIN, and Income Tax Regulations
 - » Working in Canada seminars
 - » International Graduate Students & Family Dinner
 - » Programs for Spouses and Partners of International Students
 - » Job Search Strategies for International Graduate Students
 - » International Connections Newsletter
- The GradWRITE program, offered through the Writing Support Centre includes workshops designed especially to meet the needs of second language speakers new to research writing in English, including writing grant proposals, research statements, as well as dissertation writing groups. For program information, go to: www.sds.uwo.ca/writing/index.html?grad
 - Critical Reading at the Graduate Level workshops are offered by Learning Skills Services each fall for graduate students who speak English as a second language.

For a complete listing of programs and resources for international graduate students at Western, go to grad.uwo.ca/360

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About the author

Dr. Nanda Dimitrov

*Associate Director
Teaching Support Centre*

Nanda.Dimitrov@uwo.ca

As an educational developer in the Teaching Support Centre at Western, Nanda designs professional development programs for faculty and graduate students to promote excellence in university teaching and academic communication. Her workshops have addressed supervision and communication across cultures, internationalizing the curriculum, and experiential learning in the classroom. During her PhD in Intercultural Communication at the University of Minnesota, Nanda's research explored the behavioural and value changes that individuals experience when they move between cultures. During her university teaching career, she has worked with students in courses on Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Reentry, Small Group Communication, Public Speaking, Organizational Behaviour, and the Theory and Practice of University Teaching.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the students who participated in focus group discussions and shared their experience with us, as well as all those who provided feedback on the manuscript, including Adrienne Clarke, Carol Beynon, Audra Bowlus, Debra Dawson, Jan Shepherd-McKee, Nadine LeGros, Gayle McIntyre, Craig Miller, Natasha Patrino, Allen Pearson, Judy Purves, Stephen Sims and Elizabeth Skarakis-Doyle. Thank you!

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