DUKE UNIVERSITY THOMPSON WRITING PROGRAM

Designing Course Assignments and Syllabi for Inclusivity

Designing your course assignments and syllabi with your students and
their cultural backgrounds in mind invites them more fully into your course

Assignments

Consider cultural backgrounds of students

Do students have the cultural knowledge needed to complete the assignment?
What cultural challenges might your assignment pose for certain students?

For example: Analyze the unforeseen negative impacts of this governmental program.

This type of assignment prompt may draw on cultural knowledge that non-U.S. students
are lacking. It also presumes comfort and safety in criticizing a government program, a
big step for some international students.

Expand choices students have

Analyze an x crisis that occurred in the U.S. during time period y.

> *versus*

Analyze an x crisis that occurred in the U.S., your homeland, or one of the following
countries during time period y.

Provide specific guidelines

Share a detailed description of the goals and requirements of the assignment as well as
how you plan to evaluate it. Provide clear guidelines for the specific genre of writing
(public policy memo, op-ed, lab report, research proposal, technical report, close reading).
When feasible, share a sample text with your students.

Monitor ease of understanding

Consider minimizing or explaining idiomatic or metaphorical language ("through the lens of,"
"weigh in on") as well as cultural references that may be obscure for students.

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Syllabi

Monitor ease of understanding

Consider minimizing or explaining idiomatic or metaphorical language as well as cultural references that may be obscure for students. Craft a clear late policy: "1 to 24 hours late results in a loss of x points, 25 to 48 hours late…" If your policy uses "one day late," explain if that day equals 24 hours after the deadline, if it changes at midnight, or it changes at daybreak.

Expand options for participation

Consider including Sakai forum comments and questions as counting towards participation grades, as well as pair or group work.

Emphasize your availability

Office hours are less prevalent or less-frequently used in some cultures. Where they do exist, going to such hours may be seen as a student's announcing he is not studying hard enough and thus needs extra help. Explain and normalize office hour visits, welcoming students to see you.

Pacing

Allow adequate time in your class plans for students to complete various work, including peer review, outside class as well as in class. During class, do not expect students to quickly read or write.

Grading

When grading a writing assignment, consider prioritizing its thesis, evidence, and logical structure while de-prioritizing language issues that do not interfere with comprehensibility.

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