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# Inclusive Education for International Students: Applications of a Constructivist Framework

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*International students are a globally growing population that have numerous risk factors to their successful matriculation. One classroom tool university instructors have to combat these risk factors is utilizing an inclusive pedagogical framework. Instructors of international students that wish to apply an inclusive pedagogy to meet the needs of all students are lacking in concrete examples and strategies. This manuscript expands upon the idea of constructivist education as a type of inclusive pedagogy and uses the Constructive Supervision Process (Guiffrida, 2015) to provide a methodology for instructors of international students. The tenets of the model are described in practical detail and a table of examples is provided.*

*Keywords: Inclusive Pedagogy, International Students, Constructivist*

## INTRODUCTION

International students studying in western countries have a right to culturally competent and equitable education that is not only aware of the ongoing effects of systemic privilege and oppression but actively works to hold instructors accountable within these unequal social and political structures. This manuscript posits that simply proclaiming an inclusive pedagogical framework is inadequate in western neoliberal institutions (Lazzarato, 2009). Those that teach international students must instruct from an inclusive pedagogical paradigm (Freire, 2014) including having practical exemplars of what this looks like in the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary for instructors to understand both the benefits and obstacles of an inclusive approach for students and institutions within the larger western context (Howell & Tuit, 2003). Concrete applied examples of inclusive pedagogy are largely missing for all students and almost non-existent for work with international students. This manuscript draws from the authors' backgrounds in Counselor Education and Supervision to suggest an adaptation of Guiffrida's (2015) Constructive Supervision Process in order to support the inclusive pedagogical instruction of international students.

This manuscript begins with an overview of international students in neoliberal institutions. Next, there is a brief introduction of constructivist beliefs: creation of knowledge, subjective nature of knowledge, priority on individual lived-experience, and critical narrative processes. Then, the manuscript will frame the discussion within the inclusive and socially constructive three tenets of the socially collaborative learning

process: constructive activity, teacher–student interaction, and social activity (Alt, 2017). Finally, the authors will describe and apply Guiffrida’s (2015) Constructive Supervision Process (CSP) and provide practical illustrations of inclusive pedagogy. The CSP components illustrated are Positive Regard, Empathy, Genuineness, Mindfulness, Use of Questions, Experiment with Experience, The Language of Description, and Self-Reflective Exercises. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide readers with a methodology to apply inclusive pedagogy for international students, complete with lived examples from the authors’ classroom experiences.

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTIONS**

International students make up over four million of the students in universities worldwide (UNESCO, 2014). The United States is the largest recipient of international students with about one million international students studying in higher education institutions (NAFSA, 2017). Universities are actively recruiting students globally and in doing so receive large financial and cultural benefits from international students. In the U.S., for example, the estimated economic benefit in 2016 was over thirty-two billion dollars and about four hundred thousand jobs (NAFSA). Culturally, by attracting a large number of international students, many institutions lay claim to a global campus and publicize their students’ participation in the global economy (Anand, 2015).

In conjunction with the monetary and intellectual benefits of hosting international students on campus, and despite international students’ overall resiliency, there is the concern that institutions are not serving international students effectively (Ward, Jacobs, & Thompson, 2015; Roberts, Boldy, & Dunworth, 2015). Unconscious and conscious neoliberal ideals permeate western institutions (Hill & Kumar, 2009; Sugarman, 2015); the ideals that push forward the capitalist business of education are also present in our classrooms. Examples of neoliberal ideals include 1) an emphasis on competition, 2) the promotion of human capital over human agency, 3) the monetization of ideas and the individual, and 4) a disregard of the negative effects that neoliberal ideals can have on those who participate, or who are forced to participate, in their implementation (Lazzarato, 2009). Unchallenged neoliberal ideals are a particular hurdle for international students who tend to experience language barriers, acculturation stress, lack of social support, discrimination, micro-aggressions, and “othering” (being perceived as being different and/or being treated as different from the majority group) (Perry, 2016; Ra & Trusty, 2015; Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017; Hayes, 2017) while also creating a profit for their host university. Additionally, the listed barriers have been identified as obstacles to student well-being, retention, and success (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014; Li, Wang, & Xiao, 2014; Urban & Palmer, 2016).

Educators are called to counteract the effects of neoliberalism (İnal, Akkaymak, & Yıldırım, 2014) and to eliminate barriers to student learning (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Inclusive pedagogy, through constructivist approaches, is one tool that instructors utilize to address these issues. Educators aiming for students to create knowledge by using inclusive learner-centered pedagogies is a challenging but worthwhile process (Hickling-Hudson, 2014). Di Biase (2015) investigated the conditions necessary to carry out inclusive learner-centered strategies for international students and found that tailoring pedagogical interventions to the context in which they are delivered appears to be effective. Further, Rao (2016) highlighted that international students may not be familiar

with learner-centered instruction and it may be necessary to provide transparency and patience around the expectation of an inclusive learner-centered classroom. Helping international students to understand the difference between learning to reproduce content and learning for meaning (Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017) are vital tasks of those who teach international students.

## **CONSTRUCTIVIST BELIEFS IN PEDAGOGY**

For over 20-years adult educators have shifted away from limited behavioristic teaching approaches to approaches that connect information with students' own experiences and cultural understanding. These approaches, defined as constructivism, have served as an effective model for incorporating students' own learning experiences in the classroom. Initially, constructivism melded Piaget's (1967) theory of cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. Although modern constructivism is the blending of many constructivist approaches (Phillips, 2000), a central emphasis is that learning is the process of constructing meaning through active engagement. An emphasis is put on both the construction of individual knowledge and an understanding and building of knowledge from a social or collaborative process (Alt, 2015).

Constructivists identify four central tenets that influence and enhance students' learning. The first tenet, the creation of knowledge, is the foundation of constructivism. As Doolittle and Hicks (2003) explain, "Knowledge is not passively accumulated, but rather, is the result of active cognizing by the individual" (p. 76). The second tenet holds that there is a subjective nature to knowledge. Knowledge does not exist outside the learner but is viewed through the learner's subjective experience and understanding (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2003). The third tenet, the necessity of the lived experience, emphasizes that one's cognition "organizes and makes sense of one's experiences" but this process does not provide learners with an "accurate representation of external reality" (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p. 81)—thus, we see and understand the world through our own perceptions and this may differ from the perception of others. The fourth tenet posits that knowledge is constructed in our neurological and biological systems as well as our social, cultural, and language interactions. This tenet speaks to the bi-directional processes of human development and the influences that social experiences, culture and language has on learners and their construction of knowledge and meaning.

When employing a constructivist approach, it's important to understand that international students often struggle with learner-centered experiences such as those described here and found in the U.S. As Tatar (2005) explains, international students are more experienced with instructor-centered classrooms where they do not engage in discussions unless called upon. These students lack an understanding of the rules and mores of classroom engagement in the U.S. Further, they also experience struggles with language that hamper their understanding and make it difficult to engage with native English speakers. Although the four tenets provided above outline a foundation for constructivist pedagogy, when working with international students, a greater emphasis on social constructivism may be needed in order to effectively address the issues that these students experience in higher education in the U.S. Alt (2015), emphasizes that when teaching diverse students a special emphasis should be placed on the role of social constructivist approaches. Social constructivism places an emphasis on a collaborative process that links social and cognitive knowledge building. Windschitl (2002) explains that

knowledge is developed via the “micro- and macro-cultural influences” of community-based collaboration (p. 141). Based on the need for socially collaborative learning processes, pedagogical approaches have been identified to enhance the learning environment for all students and aid in the development of knowledge through socially negotiated tasks and experiences (Alt, 2015).

Alt (2017) identifies three central tenets for enhancing social constructivism with diverse student populations: constructive activity, teacher-student interaction, and social activity. Constructive activity consists of the cognitive components of learning and is described as “learning to learn.” Alt (2017) explains that, “learning occurs during meaningful and perplexing problem solving in real-life situations and incorporates higher-order meta-cognitive learning approaches to knowledge” (p. 50). The application of constructive activity includes several tasks for instructors and learners such as viewing issues from several perspectives, situating learning in real-world tasks, emphasizing in-depth content knowledge, and connecting and adapting new information to prior knowledge.

When teaching international students, instructors should be aware of their hesitancy towards classroom engagement and possible language issues that may inhibit their participation. More support may be needed up-front, with the instructor deemphasizing their role as expert. Alt (2017) explains that the instructor moves from expert to that of facilitator “who guides and supports learners in the process of constructing knowledge” (p. 102). Within this context, much of the responsibility for learning is placed on the student for self-regulated learning. Teachers aid students in setting learning goals, connecting new information to their prior or existing knowledge, and helping students to improve meta-cognitive skills.

Finally, social activity promotes the role of dialogue in social contexts that engage students in joint problem solving. Built upon Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), students are provided with opportunities to engage in a problem-solving dialogue, gaining insight from each other’s knowledge and personal ZPD. Vygotsky posited that dialogue and language facilitates higher order thinking in learners and as Alt (2015) explains, students working within similar ZPDs are “able to describe things to one another in a simpler way that is easier to be comprehend than explanations by a person with a very different mental stage” (e.g., the teacher) (p. 102). Further, Alt (2017) found that social activity enhances emotional multicultural aspects of learning in diverse classroom environments.

The research supporting the application of constructivism in teaching international students in the university setting is limited. However, in clinical counseling training and supervision, constructivist ideas have taken root (Sexton & Griffin, 1997). This rich discourse (Winslade, Monk, & Drewery, 1997; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Manis, 2012) has provide strategies to support counseling students of all backgrounds to be prepared to work with diverse populations (Ratts & Pendersen, 2014) and has provided Counselor Educators with more effective ways of engaging with students of diverse backgrounds.

### **PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION OF GUIFFRIDA’S CONSTRUCTIVE SUPERVISION APPROACH**

Clinical counseling supervision is a distinct practice, separate from counseling or teaching (Borders & Brown, 2005). However, in following the inclusive paradigm of

using self as a vehicle of instruction, this manuscript uses the authors' lived-experience as counselor educators to expand on Guiffrida's (2015) Constructive Supervision Process (CSP) to attempt to meet the instructional needs of international students. The CSP is an integrative approach that borrows from prominent counseling research and constructivist philosophy. As outlined by Guiffrida, the CSP begins with providing guidelines for the instructor to engage students in self-reflection with a focus on the teacher-student relationship. Next, suggestions are provided regarding mindful ways to approach learning, along with an expansion of knowledge growth and questioning. Finally, ideas for self-reflective exercises are provided to deepen student experience and knowledge creation.

### **Positive Regard, Empathy, and Genuineness**

International education is a complex reciprocal process (Vasilopoulos, 2016) that requires instructors to be aware of themselves and what they are bringing into the teaching relationship. According to Rogers (1957) and Guiffrida's (2015) process there are core conditions required for growth and learning, these are: unconditional positive regard, empathy, and genuineness. Unconditional positive regard is a belief that all students can learn. This growth mindset in learning has been found effective in increasing academic self-concept and academic success (Dweck, 2006; Bain, 2004). Educators must believe in students' ability to grow and genuinely convey this message to all students, even if students are struggling with language or cultural barriers or appear to be passive learners. Unconditional positive regard is also present in instruction when educators trust students to drive discussions and select methods of evaluation. Unconditional positive regard does not, however, mean that educators just accept everything students say or provide no structure in learning opportunities. Rather, instructors with a strong positive regard for students provide challenges to learning that test the limits of their ZPD and they encourage students to reflect critically on their knowledge and lived-experience in an effort to improve their problem-solving skills and levels of social support.

Empathy is also a core condition (Rogers, 1957) for growth and learning. Instructors of international students must be able to put themselves in their students' shoes and have a deep understanding of their experience. This comes from both understanding the individual lived-experience of each student and becoming familiar with the typical struggles of subgroups of international students and international students as whole. Of course, in a classroom full of students, it can be difficult to perfectly empathize with each student individually; however, it is the lack of empathy that can become particularly problematic and lead to stereotyping and micro-aggressions (Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017). Becoming familiar with the issues experienced by international students, such as struggles with acculturation stress, are helpful in developing empathy (Ra, 2016). Monthly seminars that include faculty and international students are a practical recommendation to counter acculturation stress and increase social support, by fostering the relationships between university personnel and international students (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014). Additionally, educators can create opportunities for students to share their lived-experiences in the classroom and offer social support in the context of the student-teacher relationship as a means of both increasing instructor empathy and student care (Hayes, 2017; Chue & Nie, 2016).

Genuineness, the third core condition outlined by Rogers (1957), is the demonstration of realness or congruence. Genuineness is a necessary condition in order for the first two

core conditions, positive regard and empathy, to be demonstrated effectively. For example, it is difficult for an instructor to provide space for lived-experience in the classroom if the instructor does not believe that student experiences are valuable to course discussions or to the growth of knowledge of students. Instructors can not effectively help international students grow or overcome language barriers, if they do not believe that they are capable of growth or if they “other” international student experiences as exotic or out of the ordinary. Finally, the instructors cannot create a meaningful student-teacher relationship, if they themselves do not believe that the relationship is important or demonstrate reluctance in forming the relationship. Genuineness of self as the instructor and in the student-teacher relationship is key to effectively implementing the rest of the CSP (Guiffrida, 2015). If the tenets of constructivism (creation of knowledge, subjective nature of knowledge, priority on individual lived-experience, and critical narrative processes) do not fit with an educator’s belief system it may be the time to reflect on the fit of this approach before moving forward with the additional strategies.

### **Mindfulness, Questioning, Experimentation of Experience, Language of Description**

Mindfulness is explained as, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Encouraging students to value their own reactions and to be mindful of their impact on others, without judgement, can be an effective way to openly explore privileged and oppressive systems. Reflecting without judgement is a lifetime process (Kabat-Zinn) and details of how to do this are beyond the scope of this article. However, instructors of international students can begin to implement this approach with their students in order to create a space for collaborative student experience and the engagement of non-dominant discourse (Manathunga, 2015). International students may have a high degree of anxiety around academics, social support, and career placement (Perry, 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2016); by helping students to mindfully identify their own needs and barriers, international students may be able to acquire more effective system supports (Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017; Roberts, Boldy, & Dunworth, 2015). From our practice, one example of having students non-judgmentally identify their needs is using a tri-fold vision board. Students divide a piece of paper into three sections. One section represents where they are now, one section represents their future vision, and the middle section identifies ways that the (program, university, course, instructor, etc.) can support them in reaching their vision. Students are encouraged to be honest and not to inhibit their support needs by what has happened in the past. Once the support needs are identified, the instructor can work to integrate appropriate components into their courses and partner with university resources.

In addition to international students identifying their own support system needs, the CSP suggests that students are actively engaged in the creation of their own learning processes, which strongly aligns with constructivism. Due to language barriers and cultural norms, this may be a particular challenge for international students. However, allowing students a voice in their evaluation and knowledge creation may help to alleviate some of these systemic barriers such as discrimination, “othering”, and social isolation. Constructive educators move alongside students guiding them to deepen their construction of knowledge based on their ZPD, allowing them to co-create their learning environment. This philosophy allows international students to drive their learning and will hopefully

lead to a greater match between their learning expectations and their international study experiences (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014).

It should be noted that although students take a lead in their instruction and classroom experience, this does not mean that constructive educators are passive. Quite the opposite is true. Educators using the CSP approach actively pose reflective questions to help international students dive more deeply into the material (Guiffrida, 2015). Fierke and Lepp (2015) suggest that the simple practice of reflection increases students' ability to self-monitor and in turn engage more effectively in the learning process and Matthews (2017) argues that because international students are experiencing unfamiliar situations and they may not have a context to situate the experience, using reflexive questioning is essential to international students developing a sense of agency in their new environment. Instructors may ask the following types of questions to international students:

What is going on for you when read the material?

What are you hoping to learn from our class today?

How do you think the material connects to your life and experiences?

If you change or add something the material, what might it be?

There are no right answers to these types of questions and this can make some international students feel uneasy (Rao, 2016). Educators, however, should be transparent about what they are looking for or not looking for in asking these types of reflection questions in order to create a shared accountability space for international students (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Safipour, Weeneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017). Educators can use this type of questioning in small group instruction, large group instruction, or one-on-one. The point of this type of questioning is to prioritize students' experiences over the curriculum and attempt to increase reflection and learning (Fierke & Lepp, 2015).

The amount of time international students spend in their host country appears to impact students' perceptions of their experience (Poulakis, Dike, & Massa, 2017). As educators plan classroom instruction, it is important for them to keep in mind that their students' experience and perspectives are not static over time. The CSP approach emphasizes this change process and highlights that not only will students' perceptions of their lived-experience change, but so too will the instructor's, as all involved continue to reflect, grow, and learn (Guiffrida, 2015). Expanding upon this idea, those instructing international students can create safety around reflection and growth by helping to view all ideas as tentative. One tool suggested by the CSP approach is to use experimental or hypothesis framing when students reflect on new ideas or try new things. Instructors can say for example, "Let's try something new together..." or "This may be something you have never done before, we are all going to experiment with it together." This type of approach may be particularly helpful for international students who, when compared to their native peers, are confronted with greater rates of change and higher levels of anxiety (Perry, 2016). International students may also struggle with transition toward a more learner-centered pedagogy (Rao, 2016); therefore, it also may be helpful for instructors to explain the expectations of the inclusive learner-centered environment in terms of an experiment, without academic consequences, allowing them to try something new. Additionally, even though certain activities that are more learner-centered may be difficult for international students, instructors should not shy away from using these

strategies and instead should support students with assessment free and transparently explained activities (Woo, Jang, & Henfield, 2015). This experimental and hypothesis framing also helps to create more of an egalitarian relationship in the classroom. All involved, instructor and students, are trying something new together.

Linking to the tool of mindfulness, instructors can also encourage students to refrain from judging their ideas or endeavors as good or bad. Since students are experimenting with new ideas or new ways of learning, if actions must be labeled, they can be labeled as more effective or less effective toward the goal of individual knowledge construction. In the field of counseling this technique is often used with counseling students and clients to reduce anxiety and self-critique. This language change may seem small and inconsequential, however, increasing intentionality in the instruction of international students may further support those with language barriers and acculturation stress. Additionally, it has been posited that instructor use of this type of language encourages international students to persist (Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabic, 2017) even in the face of inequity or exclusion.

### **Self-Reflective Exercises**

Establishing a culture of support with students has long been documented as a tenet of effective teaching (Bain, 2004; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Bartram, 2009). This culture of support is also necessary for students to genuinely benefit from and engage in self-reflective exercises (Guiffrida, 2015) and to provide international students with often lacking social support. Instructors are asking students to make meaning of their lived-experience and contribute to the classroom construction of knowledge; it is necessary for instructors to be providing positive regard, empathy, and genuineness and it may be helpful to also use the non-judgmental facets of experimental language and mindfulness when applying these CSP tools. Asking non-judgmental questions to the whole class and encouraging small group and one-one discussions are effective ways to foster active student reflection. Additionally, reflective writing and/or storytelling are tools that allow international students to express their voice in their learning (Wånggren, 2016). Storytelling has a rich history in indigenous cultures and can provide students with the ability channel metaphor (Burnett, 2015) while sharing their experience. For international students who may be struggling with a language barrier the use of another medium may be appropriate; students can use collage, drawing, or photography to capture and share their experience. The key to effectively employing reflective exercises are to use them intentionally and tie their purpose and meaning with learning content. Educators who use the CSP and other constructive approaches encourage students to co-construct knowledge and make their own meaning of the material within the context of the learning environment. It is through the process of discovery and reflection that leads to learning, growth, and connection for international students. For applied examples of all tenets of the CSP model in the classroom see Table 1. Table 1 is intended for use by instructors of international students when planning instruction, facilitating discussions, creating activities, and evaluating pedagogy.

## **CONCLUSION**

International students are imperative to the growth and development of U.S. higher education systems. They contribute not only to the financial growth of colleges and universities, but they also contribute to the globalization of these institutions, providing



valuable cultural capital and enriched learning environments. The contributions that they make have the potential to benefit all students who work within the context of a global economy.

In order to more effectively collaborate with and teach international students, college and university faculty (e.g., teachers, instructors, supervisors, etc.), need effective pedagogical methodologies to address language barriers, acculturation stress, lack of social support, discrimination, and the “othering” that international students experience. In this paper we have promoted the Constructive Supervision Process (CSP) as an effective and novel approach in teaching diverse students. CSP is an integrative approach that ties counseling theory and research with constructivist pedagogical philosophies, providing instructors with both interpersonal communication skills and pedagogical approaches. These approaches lend themselves in working with students in the classroom setting as well as engaging with students in one-on-one relationship building.

Employing the foundational relationship-building skills of positive regard, empathy, and genuineness (Rogers, 1957) helps to build trusting relationships. This in turn enhances international students’ sense of safety in the learning environment and encourages their engagement as well as provides opportunities for them to share their perspectives and lived-experiences. In addition, this process allows for instructors to employ constructivist and social constructivist approaches, such as those proposed by Alt (2015). These approaches, which include constructive activity, teacher–student interaction, and social activity, provide a wide array of opportunities for knowledge development, problem-solving, and collaboration within the social context of the learning environment.

Once a foundation of trusting student-teacher relationships has been developed, the CSP pedagogical model encourages instructors to focus on mindfulness, effective use of questions, experimentation of experience, the language of description, and self-reflective exercises in the classroom (Guiffrida, 2015). These approaches provide opportunities to build upon the safe classroom environment, while challenging students’ to actively engage with others and the learning process. Further, these approaches address the language and cultural issues that may discourage international students from engaging in the classroom with their western peers. Overall, the constructivist approaches described here provide non-threatening opportunities for international students to build upon their knowledge and participate as active agents in their own learning.

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Table 1: *The Constructive Supervision Process applied to instruction for International Students*

	Definition	Examples from the Classroom
Positive Regard	Belief in all students' ability to learn and grow	I design my lessons to engage and challenge all students in the learning process
Empathy	A deep understanding and care for students' experiences	I aim to know all of my students I work to create a space where my students can share all experiences, especially feelings of exclusion and marginalization
Genuineness	Congruence between beliefs and actions in the classroom	I strive to have my actions and words match my belief system I am consistently reflecting on my positionality
Mindfulness	Noticing the self and the present moment, without judgment	I make time for students to examine their experiences without judgment I help students to non-judgmentally reflect
Questions	Strategy to engage students in reflective thought	I ask questions that do not have a predetermined answer I use questions that encourage discourse
Experiments	Way of framing self-reflective activities to increase engagement	I frame classroom activities as opportunities to experience something new I refrain from linking high stakes assessment to reflective exercises
Language	Way of delivering feedback to increase self-efficacy and participation	I help students to reframe their success or lack of success in terms of a growth mindset I avoid using "good" and "bad" and instead focus on the process of learning the construction of knowledge
Self-Reflective Exercises	Classroom activities that activate student voice and lived-experiences	I use intentional activities to activate students' stories in the context of the classroom I use multiple mediums of expression to allow reflection to be accessible for all students

*Note.* Tenets are derived from Guiffrida's (2015) approach to clinical counseling supervision.