The choice of which English proficiency exams are recognized for admissions, therefore, carries a considerable weight, not only to identify learners that can access academic input at a given level but possibly to serve as the best available indicator of a learner's potential for overarching success in an academic program.

Alex Thorp manages Centrally Managed Markets at Trinity College London and has over 15 years' experience heading a teacher training department in the UK. With special interests in English Language Assessment, CLIL, Neuro-linguistics and Evidence-based teaching, he publishes and presents globally with the aim of supporting best practices in language teaching and testing.

Lisa Besso is a former EnglishUSA Executive Board member and Co-Founder of Global Ed Professionals, a non-profit consultancy group. She and currently works with Trinity College London to help introduce American institutions to Trinity's assessments.

Trinity College London is a leading international exam board and independent education charity that has been providing assessments around the world since 1877. We specialise in the assessment of communicative and performance skills covering music, drama, combined arts and English language.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: Inviting International Students into the Conversation
by Carol Olausen and Tarah Trueblood

Introduction

The recent and highly publicized murders of people of color and those in the LGBTQ community have increased the frequency of conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues on campuses and in communities across the country. For an international student coming to a country where there are so many conversations about social identity, this can feel daunting to comprehend. Many international students are from countries that have less diversity than the United States, so their awareness of the processes a society needs to support all voices could be limited. Additionally, international media coverage of these events is presented through the lens of the culture in which they are shared. The result is that students hearing news of issues related to violence and discrimination in the US are often left with a perspective that could hold significant bias which they may bring with them when they arrive to study in the US. Nevertheless, when they arrive, international students become active members in our communities. They contribute to the rich diversity of those with whom they live, work and study. They need to have the space and knowledge to participate in these conversations and challenge preconceived ideas, since this participation will directly impact their experience for the time they are in the United States.

Working with international students to explore what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean in the context of American society is a way to answer questions students may have about their experiences. It is also a way to empower them with tools to manage their experiences to the best of their abilities.

Cultural Content Confusion

Since many students are from nations or regions with less diversity than what they may experience in the US, the cultural assumptions around having this conversation can feel overwhelming for someone who has no idea why this conversation is necessary. One initial step in orchestrating this conversation should be for the group to establish some ground rules for engaging with one another on this topic. Words have power, and non-native speakers may struggle to articulate ideas with the vocabulary they currently possess. This vocabulary could be inaccurate or informed by stereotypes or misinformation rather than truth, so a few ground rules could support the intent of this conversation. One ground rule might be to use "I" statements, such as "In my experience with professors, I have been treated in this way by a few." rather than "Professors don't like students from my country and treat us poorly." Using "I" statements allows participants to avoid blanket assumptions about a group of people. Another might be to be patient with one another and allow for mistakes as the group navigates conversations around DEI issues.

Ultimately, we want to make sure that students are able to connect what they are hearing and experiencing in terms of diversity with strategies for navigating DEI issues. In this paper, we offer several strategies for helping university-bound, international students make those connections.

Social Identity

One good starting point for bringing students into this conversation is to have them consider how social identity is socially constructed. The various ways humans identify themselves within a society has no objective reality. Rather, each social identity is the result of beliefs and practices in society and may or may not have a factual foundation apart from those beliefs and practices. According to research by Northwestern's Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching,

> An individual's social identity indicates who they are in terms of the groups to which they belong. Social identity groups are usually defined by some physical, social, and mental characteristics of individuals. Examples of social identities are race/ethnicity, gender, social class/socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, and religion/religious beliefs. Some instructors may believe that social identities are not relevant to their courses. However, as classrooms and other university learning communities (e.g. research labs) become increasingly diverse, issues related to individuals' social identities may surface (e.g., racial and gender composition of study groups). Instructors, regardless of department/college in which they teach, should be aware of and acknowledge how their social identities, as well as those of their students, impact the teaching and learning experience. (Searle Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning)

As a starting point, ask students to consider the ways in which they identify themselves. Do gender, race, religion, socio-economic status, education, nationality contribute to how they view themselves? Inviting students to consider that they may represent multiple

identities broadens their perspective of how others may relate to them, since they may build a connection based on any one or more of those identities. Facilitators can model how to articulate various aspects of identity and the fact that a single individual has multiple identities. For example, I can share some of my identities (woman, educated, mother, wife, white, American) as a way to help students consider their own.

Power, Privilege and Oppression and Microaggressions

Once students have considered their social identities, they can move on to consider the roles of power, privilege, and oppression in US society and in their societies in their home countries.

The next step is to explore how social identities relate to power, privilege, and oppression in everyday life (Miller & Garren, 2017). This would be an opportunity for a facilitator to talk about which ones of their own identities reflect power, privilege, or oppression in American society as a model. For example, I could share with my students that my identities as a white American who is educated, offer me privilege in American society. And, at the opposite end, my identity as a woman could involve oppression in how women are regarded in some parts of American society and professionally. Some students may struggle with seeing where they have privilege, so a very basic privilege would be their education: they are students at a university. Once students can start identifying how some of their identities may be privileged and some oppressed, then their understanding of the importance of their inclusion in the DEI conversations on campus or in the community take on a new level of importance.

Once students have considered their own identities, it is time to have them branch out and consider how power, privilege, and

oppression may affect others in their communities. Asking students to think of an instance in which they have witnessed, experienced, or heard about the impact of power, privilege, or oppression on someone else gives them the opportunity to now attach some understanding to that event. For example, did a student feel targeted during COVID because they are of Asian descent? Or, did a woman who wears a hijab feel that she was treated differently because she covered her hair? In addition to naming the incident, supporting students in understanding any terminology related to that incident will further support students in having the language to participate in this broader conversation of how we navigate differences as a community.

Many of these incidents amount to what are known as "microaggressions," and appear in our university communities and classrooms. Microaggressions are based on identities. They take the form of such things as "inappropriate jokes, malicious comments, singling out students, setting exam and project due dates on religious holidays, and stereotyping. (Trevino et al, 2013). What's important to note is that microaggressions are often committed unintentionally by people who are saying these things unconsciously, and who are unaware of the impact of their words in creating an environment that doesn't feel safe or comfortable for all of the students in it.

Helping students understand what microaggressions are and how microaggressions can negatively impact a person's daily experience will provide them with a context for understanding their own experiences as a target of microaggressions. Therefore, it is important to provide resources to students for identifying and navigating microaggressions in their everyday life in the US. Above all, we want to help them to build agency, so that they are able to successfully advocate for themselves and others about issues around microaggressions.

Building Agency

Conversations around identity and issues of oppression related to identity are challenging topics. However, not having the conversation with our students to support them in building agency is asking them to navigate a minefield with no protection. Students already worry enough about personal safety. Their parents also worry about personal safety. Demystifying conversations around discrimination and empowering students makes it far more likely that they will be able to confidently advocate for themselves, and others, while enriching our communities with their participation.

Intergroup dialogue practices are helpful in this demystification. Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) is based on a theoretical model that was developed and researched for over 30 years by the University of Michigan and a cohort of peer institutions. IGD brings together participants from different social identity groups in a sustained and facilitated learning environment. Through sustained dialogue with diverse peers that integrates content learning and experiential knowledge, IGD encourages participants to be intellectually challenged and emotionally engaged. These facilitated relationships influence participants' understanding of their own and others' experiences in society and cultivate individual allyship and collective agency to effect social change.

Miami University's Voices of Discovery is an intergroup dialogue program piloted by Global Initiatives in Spring of 2019. The program continues to be assessed by Miami's Discovery Center. When combining the last 3 semesters of student survey data, Voices students reported gains consistent with those of University of Michigan's peer cohort in many significant measures. Voices students reported larger positive changes in communicating with people from other groups, confidence levels of taking self- and other-directed actions,

confidence levels of intergroup collaboration, anticipated post-college involvement in redressing inequalities, involvement in social justice activities at Miami, and skills in dealing with conflict.

One IGD strategy for demystification is the PALS Approach (Pause, Acknowledge/Ask, Listen, Speak your truth/Share stories). PALS is a mnemonic device for how dialogue participants and facilitators can respond in the moment to microaggressions and other problematic comments. In the heat of the moment, it can be challenging to respond to oppressive comments. With the PALS toolkit, we can remember to simply "Pause" -- to slow things down, to unpack the comment without invalidating or putting down the person who made it.

The Pause is often the most important tool in the dialogue toolbox. Microaggressions and problematic comments come and go quickly, and, if we are not prepared, the moment passes, and we have done nothing. International students may not even recognize a microaggression, but they do feel that something inappropriate has transpired. Remembering to slow down, to pause, can make all the difference. Therefore, in the heat of the moment, simply saying, "Wow, wait a minute – I don't understand what you mean by that. Would you mind explaining?" When international students may be struggling to understand a quickly paced conversation, this lets them slow things down to make sure they understand and ask for additional clarity, when they think something may be inappropriate.

PALS also reminds us to Listen deeply–to what is going on beneath the surface, to where the speaker is coming from. Then, we can Acknowledge the humanity of the speaker and Ask probing questions. Finally, PALS reminds us to Speak our own truth and to invite others to Share relevant stories. The PALS approach

humanizes encounters with others who are different, helps people who are targets of oppression to build skills in self-agency, and invites those with unexamined perspectives to develop critical skills to interrogate those perspectives.

The PALS approach is helpful for us as leaders and facilitators and for students, but it takes practice to make it seamless. For our international students, having them practice this approach with some examples in class is a good way to help them build comfort with the language and process of using this approach. For example, students could look at these scenarios and discuss how they might use PALS to develop a conversation:

- "I can't believe ALL these international students are from China." (to an Asian student not from China)
- "You're from the Middle East, so what do you think about the oil policy in Saudi Arabia?"
- In a group project, the American students discuss and divide the work up among themselves and don't include the international student for fear that the international student will be a liability to the group.

Conclusion

For our international students to find a sense of "home" during their time in the United States and feel safe to achieve the success that is their main reason for coming here, it's imperative that we provide them with the language and tools they need to advocate for themselves and their communities. Conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion represent a commitment to our international student population to make space for them in this discussion and amplify their voices and perspectives in the dialogues undertaken in our communities.

Supporting our university-bound students in both navigating challenging conversations around these themes, as well as building their ability to advocate for themselves and one another, will engage them more fully in the classroom and in the community.

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Carol Olausen, MA, (she/her) is Director of Miami University's American Culture & English Program. Her work in education includes extensive teaching experience with project-based inquiry, experiential learning, and group dynamics training. Throughout her career, she has focused on building bridges of understanding between differing perspectives and cultures through proactive and inclusive initiatives that build agency and engagement.

Tarah Trueblood, JD, MDiv. (she/they), is Director of Miami University's Center for American and World Cultures and spearheads Miami's campus-wide Intergroup Dialogue initiative. She was Associate Director of Diversity Initiatives and Director of the Interfaith Center at University of North Florida and led the construction and operation of a living learning community, centered around diversity and inclusion, for UC Berkeley students.