Many people argue that globalization is great because it brings people from all over the world together in new collaborative projects.

Online education does this too, so it’s a natural that the two should connect. That’s why one of the most exciting aspects of online education is that it offers students the unique experience of joining their colleagues across the globe in a common learning environment. There, they can learn not only the course content, but also to appreciate other cultures, make new contacts, and develop an appreciation for different perspectives.

But as the business world shows us, international cultural exchanges haven’t always been easy. There’s a long list of outrageous cultural faux pas created by businesses when they have tried to sell their products in other countries. While the company may have good intentions, it may come across as insulting and callous from time to time, when they do not understand local customs or fail to take history into account.

The infamous example of the failure of the Chevy Nova to sell in Mexico because “no va” means “doesn’t go” isn’t true, but there are countless other incidents of cross-cultural blunders that have damaged company reputations and created ill will. Check out by Mohamed Khalifa’s slideshow, which contains these and many other examples:

- Heineken thought it was honoring the great diversity of the world and showing respect for all the countries participating in the 1994 World Cup soccer championship when it featured
pictures of national flags inside the caps of its beer bottles. One problem: the Saudi Arabian flag depicts a verse from one of the Muslim holy books, and Saudis were insulted by what they perceived as lack of respect.

- Ten years ago, a British company that made sneakers (called “trainers”) had to withdraw from the market a shoe that they had labeled “Zyklon”—the same name as the gas used to murder millions in death camps such as Auschwitz.
- Similarly, United Parcel Service (UPS) had to stop requiring its standard brown uniforms when operating in Germany, where the standard brown shirt was a reminder of the notorious Brown Shirts of Nazi Germany.

Mistakes like these can happen in education, too. And if errors like these can torpedo even the best efforts of sophisticated marketers, imagine the damage cultural misunderstandings can cause in international online courses! Such errors can create an immediate barrier that prevents open communication, honest dialogue, and genuine friendship—which are some of the greatest benefits of international online education.

**Successful course management also includes cultural sensitivity.**

As in all online courses, success depends greatly upon the ability of the professor to manage the experience effectively.

But for educators who teach courses in which students from all over the world are enrolled, successful course management also includes cultural sensitivity to a degree that is not common when teaching students who are all from the same national or ethnic/cultural traditions. It is crucial, therefore, that you plan ahead and take your time to craft thoughtful comments when you teach international students online. Make thoughtful choices about course materials, and double-check your comments in online discussions and on student assignments.

The following list provides more tips and suggestions that will help you establish an open and tolerant online learning environment for all your students:

1. **Find out where your students are from and do a little research on those cultures.** When I teach, I don’t like to know anything about my students, in order to ensure equal grading. But all my students are in the United States, so I can make certain cultural
assumptions about what they are familiar with. For example, I can cite examples from popular culture and expect that the majority of them will know what I am talking about. You can’t do this in an international environment.

I can also rely on a certain set of educational standards that they are accustomed to. You cannot make any of these assumptions when you teach students from different educational and cultural backgrounds. Instead, find out what nations your students live in, and read about their educational traditions. This can save you a great deal of agony later on.

For example, when a student doesn’t do exactly what was asked on an assignment, maybe it’s because they are used to assignments that only have general guidelines rather than specific requirements.

2. **Be sensitive to terminology.** If you describe yourself to your students as an “American” educator, don’t be surprised if your students think you are Canadian, or Mexican, or Brazilian. To the rest of the world, those little “North America” and “South America” labels on the globe are relevant. Not all “Americans” are from the United States of America. So be specific. Similarly, make sure that you use terminology that is respectful of different cultural traditions and use the accurate name of a people or nation.

For example, people in the west frequently use the names “Burma” and “Myanmar” interchangeably, but the official name of this Asian nation is The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Attention to such details will eliminate any confusion and also shows awareness and respect toward other nations.

3. **Be patient with your international students.** Your students will use different cultural norms than what you are used to, and they all come from different educational systems with different standards. Think of this as a learning opportunity for the students and yourself.

What seems insulting to you may be common usage in another part of the world. For example, Tracey Pritchard, EdD shared this experience on FacultyFocus.com:

*While I enjoy the rich diversity of foreign students in the online environment, I realize that I do not always respond well or effectively relate course material to this population. This was brought to my attention when I received an email from a student that simply stated “have sent two emails with no response, reasons?” I handled this as any good instructor would and explained that I had not received the emails and did not find the phrasing of this most*
recent email professional. I received a response from this student profusely apologizing, explaining he was from a remote area of Africa, this was his first venture into online learning, and he desired to learn how to communicate by Western standards, and would I please teach him? I was mortified by the assumptions I had so quickly made regarding a student I had never met and knew little about.

It’s safe to assume that your students have good intentions, and that any unusual language choices may simply reflect communication problems rather than ill intent, disrespect, or carelessness.

4. **Use more visual examples.** Language can create many barriers to clear communication and understanding. You may think that your words or sentences are perfectly clear, but to students who primarily communicate in a different language, a visual aid will not only help them understand what you are teaching, but will also help them expand their vocabularies. So why not borrow a page from foreign language instructors and include pictures with your comments? Many online image databases, such as Corbis and Getty, include royalty-free image images that you can use with permission, and Wikimedia Commons offers a nearly unlimited and always-expanding number of images that can be used under Creative Commons licenses. Even on a message board, you can include an illustration to clarify material and clear up confusions that language may cause.

5. **Consult with experts in your subject field:** The Higher Education Academy offers guides for teaching international students in different subjects. Follow international education chat boards and Twitter discussions to learn what teaching techniques work well with students from different cultures. You can also pick up tips on different educational styles you may encounter in student work. As in any educational endeavor, it’s important to learn from your colleagues and collaborate.

6. **Make curriculum relevant to student experiences.** I have a standard explanation of the philosophies of the Enlightenment when I teach that era of history: I use the television show “Seinfeld” and select scenes as representative of particular schools of philosophical thought. Though I do so in different ways, it’s not an original idea to use Seinfeld to teach philosophy: see Robert Fulford’s article on this or the book *Seinfeld and Philosophy* edited by William Irwin.
As effective as it is in my classrooms in the United States, it’s not necessarily going to work for students in other countries who may not be familiar with the show or understand its particularly North American sense of humor (and, to be fair, it may not work with all North Americans, either.) Seek out neutral examples, or use examples that may be more general. Another option is to give several examples that are tailored to each culture represented in your courses. This can entail a lot of extra work the first time around, but then you’ll always have them for use with future students.

7. **Encourage cultural exchanges in chats**: Most people never have the opportunity to really connect with people in far-off lands. Your class is a place where that can happen. When you ask students to contribute via discussion boards and chats, ask them to explain how different concepts are evident in their culture.

For example, if you are teaching a business course and want to discuss the importance of networking, ask your students to research and share what they find out about business customs in their country. I would bet that most people do not know that it is considered bad taste to give someone in Japan a gift that has four pieces, because a set of four is bad luck in that culture. Not only will the sharing of such information build your course content, it will assist students in building mutual understanding.

8. **Use neutral language**: This should be common practice in all online and face-to-face courses no matter where you students are located or where they are from. For example, Zachary Spence provides useful suggestions for using gender neutral terms in the classroom, because phrases we think as benign, such as “Hey, guys!” may be uncomfortable or insulting to students from other cultures. Also, you can check out the Massachusetts Score program for tips on how to do this when mediating disputes between students, but you can apply these lessons in your interactions.

9. **Avoid politics and religion**: This may be impossible in some classes; I can’t imagine teaching a history class without discussing religion, politics, and the interaction between the two. But it’s important to discuss sensitive topics in a truly academic way, with as much objectivity and factual data as possible. Otherwise, try to avoid any controversial or sensitive subjects.
10. **Remember that you set the example**: Always be respectful of all the beliefs, cultures, and perspectives expressed by the students in your class. This will encourage the students to do likewise with each other. This can be tricky; you cannot allow students to criticize different religions or belief systems, no matter how much you want to respect their freedom of speech. Also, avoid sharing personal details about your life.— In some cultures, that is considered rude or even disrespectful, and students may not know how to respond.

Teaching international students is a unique and rewarding experience for both students and faculty. As one study argued,

“... the main benefits of the globalisation of higher education are not financial (as valuable as that may be) but intellectual and cultural. The coming together of people from different parts of the world to study has the potential to form creative global communities that learn to interact and collaborate in new and previously incomprehensible ways. Such is the dynamism of life in the ‘global village’.”

But you need to keep different rules and practices in mind, because your students will all come from a variety of different backgrounds, religious and political traditions, and cultural norms. After all, you really don’t want your course to create an international incident, right?

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Images by Francisco Osorio

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Andrianes Pinantoan is InformED's editor and part of the marketing team behind Open Colleges. When not working, he can be found reading about two of his favourite subjects: education and psychology. You can find him on Google+ or @andreispsyched.

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