Document generated on 10/12/2024 2:39 a.m.

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

Teaching International Students in a Difficult Time
The Importance of Empathy
Enseigner aux personnes étudiantes internationales en période difficile
L'importnace de l'empathie

Vander Tavares

Volume 34, Number 2, December 2022

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099795ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v34i02.5648

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

ISSN

0835-4944 (print)
1925-993X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Tavares, V. (2022). Teaching International Students in a Difficult Time: The Importance of Empathy. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education / La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*, *34*(2), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v34i02.5648

Article abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has forced instructors and students to work together under constantly evolving circumstances. The abrupt transition to online education has contributed to making the educational experiences of instructors and students more emotionally complex and intense. Growing attention has been directed toward understanding the challenges international students face and their impact on the students' learning experiences, considering the unprecedented difficulties the global pandemic has posed for international student mobility. In this context, instructors are in a unique position to support international students. One way to do so is by being (more) empathetic. Empathy is important because it not only helps us feel for and with the other, but also improves the academic outcomes of students. This paper discusses the importance of empathy in teaching international students by expanding on the concept of teacher empathy. This paper also critically examines the experiences of international students in higher education in several domains of lived experience, such as the linguistic, academic, social, cultural, and psychological. Other aspects of empathy presented are its contagious nature and the concept of radical empathy. This paper concludes by highlighting the practical application of empathy in light of international students' experiences.

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes, 2023

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Volume 34 Issue 2

cjsae
the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
rcééa

PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A DIFFICULT TIME: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Vander Tavares

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

34,2 December/décembre 2022, 57–72
ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A DIFFICULT TIME: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Vander Tavares
Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has forced instructors and students to work together under constantly evolving circumstances. The abrupt transition to online education has contributed to making the educational experiences of instructors and students more emotionally complex and intense. Growing attention has been directed toward understanding the challenges international students face and their impact on the students' learning experiences, considering the unprecedented difficulties the global pandemic has posed for international student mobility. In this context, instructors are in a unique position to support international students. One way to do so is by being (more) empathetic. Empathy is important because it not only helps us feel for and with the other, but also improves the academic outcomes of students. This paper discusses the importance of empathy in teaching international students by expanding on the concept of teacher empathy. This paper also critically examines the experiences of international students in higher education in several domains of lived experience, such as the linguistic, academic, social, cultural, and psychological. Other aspects of empathy presented are its contagious nature and the concept of radical empathy. This paper concludes by highlighting the practical application of empathy in light of international students' experiences.

Résumé

La pandémie de COVID-19 a obligé les populations enseignante et étudiante à collaborer dans des circonstances en constante évolution. La transition soudaine à l'éducation virtuelle a complexifié et intensifié l'expérience émotionnelle de l'éducation. Un intérêt croissant est porté sur les défis des personnes étudiantes internationales et leur incidence sur l'expérience d'apprentissage, étant donné les difficultés inédites de la pandémie mondiale pour leur mobilité. Le personnel enseignant occupe une position unique pour soutenir ces personnes. Une manière, c'est d'être (plus) empathique. L'empathie nous aide à partager les sentiments de l'autre et améliore les résultats scolaires. Cet article explore l'importance de l'empathie dans l'enseignement de personnes étudiantes internationales en élargissant le concept de l'empathie du

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
34,2 December/décembre 2022, 57–72
ISSN1925-993X (online)
© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

personnel enseignant. Il pose aussi un regard critique sur les expériences de formation supérieure internationale dans plusieurs domaines de vie des personnes étudiantes internationales, notamment linguistique, scolaire, social, culturel et psychologique. D'autres dimensions de l'empathie présentées sont sa nature contagieuse et le concept de l'empathie radicale. La conclusion souligne l'application pratique de l'empathie à la lumière des expériences des personnes étudiantes internationales.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has forced instructors and students to work together under constantly evolving circumstances. Instruction in the absence of traditional face-to-face and physical interaction has been one of the greatest novelties many instructors and students alike have had to adjust to, especially in light of insufficient preparation time. On another interrelated level, the abrupt transition to online education has contributed to making the educational experiences of instructors and students more emotionally complex and intense (Sahu, 2020). Feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and anxiety have contextualized the experiences of many instructors and students as they have attempted to cope with various unexpected challenges related to teaching and learning online. Within the latter group, growing attention has been directed particularly toward understanding the experiences of international students, considering the unprecedented difficulties the global pandemic has posed for international student mobility in higher education (Tavares, 2021a).

In the Canadian context, the pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing challenges international students face. A recent report by One Voice Canada—a non-profit organization that works to bring local communities and international students together—brought to the surface a picture of the harsh reality of dozens of international students, a picture that many may be unaware of (Garcha, 2021). To illustrate, the significant impact of the pandemic on businesses has led many international students to seek and engage in illegal work to meet their financial needs, thereby leaving them in an even more vulnerable position of exposure to exploitation. More concerning is the influence of the pandemic on international students' psychological well-being. According to the organization, a rise in suicide rates among international students has been observed. One of these cases was Amrinder Singh's, a 21-year-old student at Douglas College who, according to friends, was experiencing financial hardship and could not access mental health support (Garcha, 2021).

Restrictions implemented in response to the pandemic have also affected international students outside Canada. Students who had been accepted into a program at a Canadian college or university were forced to postpone or cancel their study plans because of entry restrictions. For those who were allowed to enter, the financial cost attached to the new three-day hotel-based quarantine emerged as a major and unexpected barrier (Government of Canada, 2021). Coupled with several days of isolation—even more so for international students travelling to the Atlantic provinces where an additional quarantine was mandated—many were led to reconsider their decisions or begin their studies under heightened stress (Alhmidi, 2021). Needless to say, the financial, social, and psychological challenges international students encounter have a direct impact on their ability to meet the expectations of their courses and to enjoy the learning experience (Cho & Yu, 2015; Faiza, 2015). Yet, considering the virtual nature of interaction in present-day higher education, such challenges can become ever harder for others to identify.

Nevertheless, instructors are in a unique position to support international students. While institutions of higher education continue to prioritize student well-being and success

through responsive programming, interactions with instructors hold a multifaceted meaning for international students. In addition to approaching instructors for expert knowledge within a particular discipline, international students may seek professional and personal guidance from instructors, formally or informally, when instructors also happen to act as a student's advisor or supervisor (Tavares, 2020). International students may approach faculty more frequently than their domestic peers do, and when the outcomes of these interactions are positive, international students experience more social and academic inclusion (Glass et al., 2015). In a similar vein, when international students consider instructors to be inclusive and supportive in their teaching, including the ways in which instructors develop the curriculum and the expectations for interaction, the students tend to feel more satisfied and better connected to their academic communities (Glass et al., 2015).

One way instructors can improve the experiences of international students is by being (more) empathetic. Empathy fosters mutual understanding and growth, and becomes even more essential nowadays in consideration of how the global pandemic has negatively impacted students in higher education. Empathy is important because it not only helps us feel for and with the other, but also improves the academic outcomes of students (Thapa et al., 2013). As research suggests, the emotions instructors display have a direct consequence for how students engage in learning (Titsworth et al., 2013). Furthermore, by being empathetic toward students, instructors create a more positive classroom community in which the instructor's behaviour serves to encourage students to better interact with and understand one another. Both within and outside the classroom, empathy fuels instructors' (and students') involvement with social justice (Dolby, 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of empathy in teaching international students in higher education. As a critical literature review, this paper is guided by the following two questions: What is teacher empathy and why is it important when teaching international students? Teacher and instructor are used interchangeably henceforth. This paper begins by expanding on the concept of teacher empathy according to the framework proposed by Meyers and colleagues (2019). Subsequently, this paper critically examines the experiences of international students in higher education in several domains of lived experience, such as the linguistic, academic, social, cultural, and psychological. Additionally, this paper argues that empathy has a positively contagious effect within and across groups. It then progresses to discuss the concept of radical empathy (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). The conclusion focuses on the practical application of empathy in light of international students' experiences.

Unpacking "Empathy"

Teaching is an emotional experience. Many teachers will proudly admit they have a *passion* for teaching and will frequently use emotional language to describe their experiences, as in having an emotionally "draining" or "stimulating" class or feeling "excited" about teaching a new course. Hargreaves (1998) described good teachers as individuals who are not only qualified or knowledgeable of their subject but also sensitive to emotions. He stated that good teachers are "emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy" (p. 835). Interaction and relationship are at the centre of teaching, for there is no teaching without students. Uitto et al. (2018) found that students considered life-changing teachers to be those who

demonstrated love and understanding to them. While there were also other characteristics involved, such as giving advice and being a friend, the students placed emphasis on experiencing a supportive and understanding relationship with their teachers.

However, emotions have not always been considered a natural, positive, or even important component of the teaching and learning experience. Dirkx (2001) critiqued the "tradition of marginalizing emotions and elevating rationality to a supreme position" in adult education, which conflated paying attention to emotions as a barrier to achieving "objective thinking" by both teachers and students (p. 67). When emotions are acknowledged in adult education, they may still be treated as *separate* from learning: they are "opportunities for learners to 'vent' and 'get it off their chests' so they can get back to the 'business of learning'" (p. 67). As Uitto et al. (2018) found, however, memorable learning experiences are embedded in emotional experiences, whether pleasant or otherwise. Dirkx (2001) emphasized that emotions are constructive for not only achieving a pedagogical goal but also getting to know oneself better through reflection. By asking questions in moments in which emotions come to the surface, students and teachers can access meanings of past experiences and relate them to the present learning experience.

When teaching adults, it is important that learning is contextualized within the students' lived experiences. The classroom is not a discrete space, detached from the students' realities. It is an extension of students' daily experiences where classroom-based interactions evoke new emotions and support the process of making sense of emergent or pre-existing emotions (Dirkx, 2008). Dirkx (2008) underscored the importance of constructive and holistic approaches to integrating emotions into adult education where the student body is characterized by multiple forms of diversity. Educators can foster epistemological and ontological diversity by drawing on such approaches that "challenge [the] historical dominance of reason and scientific ways of knowing" in education (p. 15). As adults, international students come from different "walks of life" and may bring emotional experiences into the classroom that may seem foreign or challenging for teachers. Instead of supressing such emotional experiences, teachers can be empathetic so as to contribute to enhancing, rather than supressing, international students' learning through the emotions.

Most people have experienced some degree of empathy, even unawarely. Jordan (2010) defined empathy as "a complex cognitive-affective skill that allows us to 'know' (resonate, feel, sense, cognitively grasp) another person's experience" (p. 103). Empathy may therefore be considered both an interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional experience. Empathy has also been conceptualized specifically within the context of teaching. Meyers et al. (2019) explained that teacher empathy is "the degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students' personal and social situations" (p. 161). The authors added that teacher empathy is also about how instructors "feel caring and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their behavior" (p. 161). While all instructors are empathic, how much empathy instructors have varies from one individual to another (Meyers et al., 2019).

Meyers and colleagues (2019) have proposed a framework for teacher empathy that consists of three components. The first is the cognitive, which includes "taking students' perspectives and understanding their personal and social situations" (p. 161). The second is the affective, where teachers put themselves in the student's shoes on an emotional level. The third is the behavioural, where instructors with high teacher empathy "set boundaries" for themselves about how much and when to share in a manner that is constructive, but still

make students' learning a priority (p. 161). Nevertheless, empathy does not come naturally. Empathy is, in other words, something instructors (need to) *do* intentionally—continuously, effortfully, and meaningfully. Understanding the three components of empathy is essential; however, this paper will focus on the first by providing a contextualized and critical discussion of international students' personal and social situations in the next section.

Meyers et al. (2019) argued that understanding students' personal and social situations is key to becoming a more empathic instructor. A student's personal situation is that of the individual student alone. Paying attention to a student's personal situation includes learning about the student as a whole person and how the unique circumstances of their personal life affect their education. A student who is a caregiver to a family member, a full-time worker, or a single parent will likely encounter a complex learning experience as they deal with the demands coming from within as well as outside the academic environment. A student's social situation, on the other hand, reflects the challenges connected with the socio-economic and sociological profile of the student as a member of a larger group. These include, but are not limited to, a student's race, ethnicity, language, gender, sex, and age.

Understanding a student's personal and social situations characterizes the cognitive component of empathy because it requires intentional learning and thinking. In turn, this new knowledge equips instructors to "generate non-pejorative explanations for undesirable student behaviors" (Meyers et al., 2019, p. 162). In practice, this may mean, for instance, not interpreting a student's lack of oral participation in a class discussion as an indication of disinterest or hostility toward instruction or the instructor. Rather, an empathic response would entail learning more about the student and subsequently understanding how their contextual obligations may manifest in their behaviour in the classroom. Cross-cultural differences, sometimes coupled with feelings of embarrassment or fear, can lead international students to avoid sharing about their personal and social situations with instructors (Bui et al., 2021). Empathy in teaching can therefore help create a space of trust between teacher and student (Tran, 2020).

Empathy stemming from cross-cultural experience can also help teachers reject stereotypes when attempting to make sense of the experiences of others. Cushner (2007) found that teachers working in a teaching program abroad developed an empathic understanding of others and themselves. One teacher explained that "being in a new and different [cultural] situation has given me the opportunity to relate to a student who may be new to my future classroom. This is one way I have gained more sensitivity" (p. 31). Tavares (2021b) discussed the academic experience of an international student who felt better supported when the teaching assistant taught new content from a perspective that considered international students' social situation of possible unfamiliarity with the English language. The same student expressed feeling ignored and disadvantaged when, in another course, the instructor explained concepts of the discipline without putting herself in the shoes of the student, who had had almost no contact with the content prior to the course.

As classrooms are increasingly characterized by diversity, empathic teaching becomes even more necessary. Peck et al. (2015) found that teachers who demonstrated higher levels of empathy valued difference between students, supported diversity, and worked better with both students and their families from learning about the students' individual and social situations. The paragraphs below provide context specifically for international students' social situations by focusing on the challenges students encounter on the basis of their positioning as international students in higher education. Personal situations are

impossible to fully document; however, one is also highlighted as a critical example in the next section in which the impact of the absence of teacher empathy may be illustrated.

Understanding International Students' Social and Personal Situations

International students have reported encountering a range of challenges in their host environments. Since the vast majority of international students studying in Canada are non-native speakers of English (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2020), it is common that communication-related barriers may be experienced. Despite the interest in participating in social activities with locals, for instance, the potential for success in interpersonal interaction can be undermined by insufficient knowledge of cultural forms of the English language. Unfamiliarity with cultural remarks, such as jokes and slang, is known to contribute to feelings of exclusion in conversational exchanges (Myles & Cheng, 2003). In addition to potential unfamiliarity with everyday use of language, insufficient linguistic proficiency in English can also be a source of tension. Feelings of inadequacy and anxiety may result from the difficulty in understanding others as well as in expressing oneself in English naturalistically (Liu, 2011).

Multilingual international students have been commonly referred to as ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Such is not a neutral label. Being an "ESL student" carries a strong image of linguistic deficit since the student's proficiency is compared against that of a monolingual native speaker of English (Cruz-Ferreira, 2010). On the basis of (non-native) language, multilingual international students may receive unequal support service relative to their native-speaking domestic peers in colleges and universities (Oropeza et al., 2010). Moreover, multilingual international students have been assigned a double deficit when "inferior" language proficiency is conflated with inferior intelligence. International students who do not embody stereotypically Western behaviour in the classroom—such as in cutting their peers off in discussion, dominating conversations, and challenging their instructors' viewpoints—are considered passive and uncritical (Fell & Lukianova, 2015).

For international students from the Global South in particular, challenges also originate from cultural difference. In the context of (cross-)cultural experiences in the new community, it is important to highlight what Lee and Rice (2007) have defined as neo-racism. The authors view neo-racism as discrimination "based on culture and national order" (p. 389). In this sense, nations, cultures, and languages are organized into hierarchies that justify efforts to preserve the "good" behaviour and values, and eradicate the "bad" ones (Tavares, 2022a). International students encounter neo-racism when they are discriminated against on the basis of their dress code, public behaviour, food traditions, or any other aspect connected with the students' skin colour, culture, national origin, and the "relationships between countries" (Lee, 2007, p. 28). Lee and Rice (2007) explained the mechanism behind neo-racism:

> Discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to "natural" tendencies to preserve group cultural identity—in this case the dominant group. Underlying neo-racism are notions of cultural or national superiority and an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world. Neo-racism does *not* replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed. (p. 389, emphasis in original)

Neo-racism fuels public discourse that paints international students as liabilities to their host communities. Such discourses operate by ignoring the lived realities of international students, which are often characterized by hardship, and the discrepancies between policy and experience. International students have been negatively framed in a number of ways, including as threats to Canadian society (Anderson, 2019), as wily and law-breaking individuals, and as disruptive to Canadian academe (Tavares, 2021b). However, this is hardly the case for students coming from the Global North (Lee & Rice, 2007). Neo-racism toward international students from the Global South range from "being ignored to verbal insults and confrontation" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 405). Unfortunately, such experiences occur even within the students' academic communities from the direction of fellow students and faculty, in the very space where international students hope to find support and friendship.

For many international students from the Global South, studying abroad is a financially stressful experience. Despite the higher tuition costs in comparison to local students, international students encounter legal limitations as to how much work they are allowed to undertake. Up until the 2010s, universities were better able to support incoming international students through scholarships before systematic budget cuts (Choudaha, 2017). Currently, however, the situation has changed drastically in light of major budget cuts that universities in Canada have experienced. Some international students may attempt to mitigate their financial challenges by working more hours than permitted on their work permits. Yet, without a contextualized understanding of international students' realities, exceeding the number of hours allowed is interpreted as a crime worthy of potential deportation (Tavares, 2021b). When international students are discriminated against, they may avoid speaking up for fear of being rejected or ruining their "one" opportunity to study abroad (Lee & Rice, 2007).

The academic community is embedded within international students' broader social contexts. As such, the classroom also becomes an environment where the students encounter a range of challenges and obstacles based on language, race, ethnicity, and age (Tavares, 2021b). In group discussions, international students' contributions may be considered unimportant or irrelevant simply on the basis of the students' status as "foreigners," which is enough for the classroom community to position them as outsiders (Morita, 2004). Experiences of collaborative work also entail discrimination in the form of cultural stereotypes and racism, and even direct exclusion or rejection from the group (Guo & Guo, 2017). Although the presence of multilingual international students has grown noticeably in Canadian classrooms, the lack of a meaningfully internationalized curriculum privileges local student knowledge and presents international content from an ethnocentric perspective (Guo & Guo, 2017).

The impact of such challenges is significant. International students may develop feelings of anxiety, depression, dissatisfaction, and inadequacy, and self-isolate from the community (Xing & Bolden, 2021). It is critical to recognize that these challenges affect international students in their learning experiences within the classroom. In other words, the students cannot simply ignore their experiences from outside the classroom when they come to class. Yet, as instructors, we may be unaware of international students' social contexts and may lack understanding of how they respond to these challenges—voluntary or involuntary, psychologically and behaviourally. An international student's unsatisfactory performance on an assignment should never be understood as an indicator of low intelligence. In the

same way teaching is influenced by a range of social and emotional factors outside the control of the instructor, so is the learning experience of the student.

These are some of the social situations that characterize the experiences of international students from the Global South as a categorical group. The issues discussed previously are related to the sociological construction of international students from the Global South as the *other* group in English-speaking academe of the Global North, primarily in light of students' cultures and languages. When it comes to *personal situations*, however, it is paramount to recognize that there is great individual variance among international students in relation to their personal lives (Tavares, 2022b). There are practical reasons for treating international students categorically as a monolithic group, especially when it comes to foregrounding the needs of international students within an educational and cultural system that has been designed for the local student. While attempts have been made to understand international students' personal situations by grouping students on the basis of a common language or ethnicity, the effectiveness of such an approach is limited (Tavares, 2021c).

CBC News has recently released a news article that can represent one of many possible personal situations of international students from the Global South. In the article, the news corporation foregrounded the experience of an international student from Myanmar, where a military coup took place (Jonas, 2021) and received extensive coverage by the media. The student in question was enrolled at a Canadian university, though completing their studies completely online due to travel restrictions associated with the global pandemic. Needless to say, a military coup poses significant threats to a student's psychological well-being and physical safety. While using this episode to exemplify an international student's personal situation may be on the more extreme side of the continuum, the episode serves, nevertheless, as a constructive example for the ethical importance of empathy. However, this was not the case for this particular student.

According to the news article, the student had emailed their instructor to request an exam deferral. The student was led to make such a request following "an impending countrywide communications blackout due to political unrest" (Jonas, 2021, para. 2). In writing, the instructor dismissed the student's request by saying, "Last chance, bad sign. Even the internet came down with COVID-19?"—to which the student responded, "The internet did not come down with [COVID-19]. There was a military coup where I am living and almost 200 protestors have been shot [as of] now. The regime has decided to shut off all communications by tomorrow" (paras. 7–8). As it became evident to the student that they would be missing the exam due to the unavailability of Internet connection, the student wrote to their instructor again, asking if they (the student) should be feeling concerned about missing the exam. The instructor replied:

> Of course you should. The next time you miss something, it's over. By the way, your remarks (both related to this course and to your home country) made me wonder how you understand reality. People don't get shot for just protesting, but for a lot deeper reasons. (Jonas, 2021, paras. 10–11).

As it can be seen, the student approached their instructor from a place of vulnerability. The student's vulnerability may be found in their disclosure of a personal experience of such depth. The student's disclosure is one that calls for help and hopes for understanding on the part of the other, considering the impact of the military coup on the student's surroundings and on their ability to meet academic expectations. The lack of empathy delivered by the

instructor points to a missed opportunity in which enormous potential growth could have been experienced. Based on Jordan and Schwartz's (2018) conception of radical empathy, the instructor was not "influenced, even slightly, by the student's situation" (p. 27). As instructors, we must remain mindful of how the lack of empathy can not only obstruct growth or dismiss a student's disclosure of vulnerability but also perpetuate the student's unfavourable condition for which they have sought out emotional and academic support from us in the first place.

The Contagious Power of Empathy

It is important to note that the unfortunate case involving the student from Myanmar was advocated for by the student's peers. The response of the student's peers suggests that the whole student group was emotionally impacted by the student's plight, though to differing extents. Indeed, the impact propagated by the lack of empathy led one student to document the email exchange—which took place in the class chat—and later share it with university staff. This particular student described the way he felt by saying, "I was so appalled at how that [instructor] was treating that student" (Jonas, 2021, para. 15). From an empathy perspective, the reporting student, who was in Canada, *felt* for the other student so viscerally that he chose to act on the student's behalf, unsolicited. In other words, the reporting student's response emerged organically after he put himself in the shoes of the other student. As the reporting student's empathic response illustrates, physical contact is not always required for emotional contagion to develop (Kramer et al., 2014).

Emotional contagion occurs when the processing and expressing of emotions result in the transmission of sentiment. The emotions of one member of a group may affect other group members (within group) or affect members of different groups (across groups). Bowen (2014) defined emotional contagion as "the process by which people, faculty or students, influence the emotions of others by displaying their own emotions and behaviors, consciously or unconsciously" (para. 30). Research shows that emotional contagion among students may not only happen easily and naturally but also powerfully influence future group dynamics (e.g., completing and co-ordinating tasks) and the well-being of individual group members (King & Datu, 2017). Emotional contagion may be considered a subset of social contagion, which additionally includes motivational, behavioural, and even physical contagion, among other types (Ali et al., 2012; King & Datu, 2017; Radel et al., 2010).

The school climate plays a considerable role in how students feel. The reverse is, perhaps unsurprisingly, also true: students' well-being affects the school climate (King & Datu, 2017). The school climate relates to "the character and quality of life in a school" and includes areas such as "safety, teaching and learning, social relationships, and environmental-structural factors" (King & Datu, 2017, p. 118). The school climate should be considered broadly to take into account the class(room) climate. Consequently, the emotional experiences of one student not only affect another student directly, but may also be "picked up" from the environment by others because of the emotional influence of one student's situation on the mood (i.e., the climate) of the class as a whole. From such a stance, the well-being of students and their satisfaction with learning will depend on a positive climate within their academic communities.

Students often look up to their instructors and model their thinking and behaviour accordingly. Within the classroom, the instructor holds more power, and thus, also the

responsibility/opportunity to centrally contribute to promoting and maintaining a satisfying environment and experience for their students. Considering the challenges intensified by the pandemic within students' personal and social situations, empathic teaching becomes an ethical commitment. A response to a student that stems from empathy, rather than suspicion or dismissal, will enhance the classroom climate by means of contagion because such a response improves the relationship between instructor and student in the first place. In a similar vein, when students respond to their instructors from a positive place (whether physical or psychological), they are more likely to succeed on their assignments (Pekrun et al., 2006). In short, expressing empathy can sequentially improve individual relationships, group satisfaction, the classroom climate, and students' academic success.

From Empathy to Radical Empathy

Another understanding of empathy in practice stems from the concept of radical empathy. Jordan and Schwartz (2018) argued that radical empathy "involves radical acceptance of vulnerability, an openness to being affected by one another" (p. 28). From this perspective, students and instructors engage with one another with a readiness to change and grow. The authors proposed that for empathy to have an impact on a student's personal situation, "the student must sense that the professor has been touched, impacted, or influenced, even slightly, by the student's situation" (p. 27). Such an approach productively moves beyond genuine acknowledgments by actually fostering an experiential opportunity for growth for both instructor and student. Aiming for growth brings the two parties together: the student feels better understood and the instructor learns in the process. In the authors' words, "The power to change in connection is at the heart of radical empathy" (p. 28).

Some instructors might avoid displaying vulnerability in order to maintain their professional identity in the classroom. However, by acting so, opportunities to exercise radical empathy, and thus grow, are missed as "growth most powerfully happens at the edge of vulnerability, where there can be uncertainty and complex feelings" (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018, p. 30). Additionally, vulnerability that flows from radical empathy helps dispel the cultural construction that students bring into the classroom of teachers as all-knowing individuals whose teaching remains seemingly unaffected by daily ups and downs and by the fact that learning is a lifelong process. Viewing knowledge as co-constructed, radically empathic teachers elevate students' novel and personal contributions as pieces of knowledge that fill gaps within the teachers' repertoire of knowledge. Teachers and students must remain open to being impacted by the emotions that transpire from the exchange of knowledge.

Jordan and Schwartz (2018) proposed that what and how much a teacher lets out needs to be considered carefully. In particular, if a teacher's disclosure "seems likely to pull students' attention away from their own learning, then it seems unlikely to serve the students and their growth" (p. 30), even if the opportunity for growth presents itself as apparently appropriate. In teacher-student interactions, the teacher is the individual with more power. Consequently, the teacher's responsibility is also much greater in that the continuous need to prioritize student learning rests with the teacher. This is not to say that the teacher should simply not share something that is complex or distressing yet meaningful. It means, however, sharing on a more suitable occasion when growth can occur without interrupting the learning experience. Indeed, careful consideration does not equate to maintaining strict

boundaries, for it is at this point of convergence that genuine and mutual growth occurs (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Radical empathy also means recognizing when specialized support may be needed. When instructors make themselves available and open to learn with and from their students, they should also expect to encounter situations in which the student's disclosure points to an experience of crisis (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Despite the desire to help, there are instances in which the instructor must assess the student's situation and work in partnership with a specialized service provider. Even when the kind of assistance required falls outside the capability or expertise of the instructor, however, extending emotional support can help a student navigating a difficult situation feel motivated and focused on learning while they work with another professional to find resolution to their challenging situation, whether it be related to academics or otherwise (Frisby, 2019).

Meeting the student at the point of convergence does not mean teachers have to lower or are necessarily lowering the standards. Jordan and Schwartz (2018) rejected the assumption that "to be empathic is to demand less of students" (p. 32). When instructors are willing to meet their students "where they are at"—to stand on the terrain of the student so that situations can be examined from the students' emic perspectives—they demonstrate not only care and understanding but also the desire to help the student progress at an individually reasonable pace. Receiving emotional support from instructors is linked to an improvement in "behavioural engagement and academic help seeking behaviours" in post-secondary students (Sakiz, 2012, p. 73). Lowering standards is only possible if instructor-student interactions are conceived of in terms of boundaries sustained by uneven power distributions rather than (finding) common ground.

Concluding Remarks: Applying Empathy

Jordan and Schwartz (2018) drew attention to a three-step method for instructors experiencing a lack of empathy. As the authors noted, instructors will not be feeling the same degree of empathy consistently all the time. However, it is important to evaluate when the lack of empathy becomes chronic. One way to do so is by paying attention to feelings that signal the loss of connection with students: distance, distraction, and even annoyance. Indeed, *noticing* is the first step. It entails noticing other emotions that could be disproportionately consuming ourselves as instructors. *Pausing* for reflection comes next. Pausing allows instructors to ask "why" something is happening in order to understand if it is a feeling triggered by a specific student behaviour or if it is our own projection of an individual, unrelated emotional experience. Pausing can help us "move from being reactive to being intentionally responsive, a much more constructive place from which to teach" (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018, p. 32).

The third step is *trying to reconnect*. In this part of the process, the attempt to reconnect may materialize following self-reflection on our feelings alone or an intentional focus on "one positive characteristic of the student, the moment, or self that can help us reconnect" (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018, p. 33). The authors highlighted the importance of trying to see beyond the immediate situation. In the context of the international student from Myanmar, this may mean focusing on the student's vulnerability and willingness to ask for help, despite the student's individual (hypothetical) late request or lack of participation in the course. Attempting to reconnect with a student by paying attention to the moment entails asking

what is happening right now (e.g., a military coup, Internet shutdown) and why it matters. If these do not help, then the focus shifts to self: as instructors, we want to support all students equally through our teaching practice (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018) and this should not change in response to students' attitudes to instruction.

For empathy to make a difference, instructors need to be cognizant of international students' individual and social situations. Any aspect of empathic teaching, from course planning to marking assignments, will require effort on the part of instructors. To understand their students' situations, instructors will need to be willing to (make time to) learn and listen to their students. Equally important, Meyers et al. (2019) recommended that "instructors design course policies that reflect a deep understanding of students' personal and social situations" (p. 162). This is a practical step after learning about and reflecting on international students' situations. A course that is inclusive and considerate may have flexible assignment due dates, accept diverse participation styles, or include other academic and linguistic accommodations that support the achievement of success while maintaining high standards for all.

Empathic teaching toward international students in difficult times also means teaching them foundational academic skills. Time management, critical reading, note taking, collaborative learning, and critical thinking are some of the basic skills required for success in academia; however, many international students will have had different levels of exposure to these prior to moving abroad for the purpose of higher education. While instructors cannot always teach foundational skills due to time constraints or expertise, they can work with campus support services to integrate those skills in their courses or encourage international students to develop them with external assistance. Help-seeking behaviour is culturally influenced (Chen & Lewis, 2011), and empathic teaching may also mean teaching students to recognize when help is needed and where to find it. Knowledge about international students' situations can help empathic instructors to anticipate challenges for students and to create awareness of mechanisms for support.

Additionally, empathic teachers should strive to create a safe environment for international students. Many of the experiences of inequality that international students face in the broader host community may also be present within the academic environment, particularly the classroom, if we understand that the classroom is an extension of the broader socio-cultural setting. Empathic teachers in universities where English is the medium of instruction need to be aware that multilingual international students are trying to succeed in a space that has been traditionally designed on an Anglocentric notion of success. Valuing international students' contributions—but much more critical, *building upon them* and recognizing them as assets—can help challenge the monocultural and monolingual fabric of higher education and promote inclusivity. After all, empathy is about putting oneself in the other's shoes and viewing the world from a different perspective.

References

Alhmidi, M. (2021, March 27). *Canada's schools draw fewer international students due to pandemic travel rules.* CTV News. https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/canada-s-schools-draw-fewer-international-students-due-to-pandemic-travel-rules-1.5364894

Ali, M. M., Amialchuk, A., Gao, S., & Heiland, F. (2012). Adolescent weight gain and social networks: Is there a contagion effect? *Applied Economics, 44*(23), 2969–2983. https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2011.568408

Anderson, T. (2019). News media representations of international and refugee postsecondary students. *The Journal of Higher Education, 91*(1), 1–26.

Bowen, J. (2014). Emotion in the classroom: An update. *To Improve the Academy, 33*(2), 196–219. https://doi.org/10.1002/tia2.20012

Bui, H. T., Selvarajah, C., & Vinen, D. G. (2021). The role of student–university value alignment in international student acculturation in Australia. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 84*, 142–154.

Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2020). *International students in Canada continue to grow in 2019.* https://cbie.ca/international-students-in-canada-continue-to-grow-in-2019/

Chen, H. M., & Lewis, D. C. (2011). Approaching the "resistant:" Exploring East Asian international students' perceptions of therapy and help-seeking behavior before and after they arrived in the United States. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 33*(3), 310–323. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-011-9154-6

Cho, J., & Yu, H. (2015). Roles of university support for international students in the United States: Analysis of a systematic model of university identification, university support, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 19*(1), 11–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314533606

Choudaha, R. (2017). Three waves of international student mobility (1999–2020). *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(5), 825–832. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293872

Cruz-Ferreira, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Multilingual norms.* Peter Lang.

Cushner, K. (2007). The role of experience in the making of internationally-minded teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 34*(1), 27–39.

Dirkx, J. M. (2001). The power of feelings: Emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2001*(89), 63–72.

Dirkx, J. M. (2008). The meaning and role of emotions in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 120*(Winter), 7–18.

Dolby, N. (2014). The future of empathy: Teaching the millennial generation. *Journal of College and Character, 15*(1), 39–44. https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2014-0006

Faiza, O. (2015). *Building rapport between international graduate students and their faculty advisors: Cross cultural mentoring relationships at the University of Guelph* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Guelph.

Fell, E. V., & Lukianova, N. A. (2015). British universities: International students' alleged lack of critical thinking. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 215*, 2–8.

Frisby, B. N. (2019). The influence of emotional contagion on student perceptions of instructor rapport, emotional support, emotion work, valence, and cognitive learning. *Communication Studies, 70*(4), 492–506. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2019.1622584

Garcha, N. (2021, April 7). *Pandemic takes tragic toll on international students with rising deaths by suicide: Report.* Global News. https://globalnews.ca/news/7745098/pandemic-takes-tragic-toll-on-international-students-with-rising-deaths-by-suicide-report/

Glass, C. R., Kociolek, E., Wongtrirat, R., Lynch, R. J., & Cong, S. (2015). Uneven experiences: The impact of student-faculty interactions on international students' sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students, 5*(4), 353–367.

Government of Canada. (2021). *COVID-19 mandatory hotel stopover: About.* Last modified on April 14, 2021. https://tinyurl.com/y3zhafne

Guo, Y., & Guo, S. (2017). Internationalization of Canadian higher education: Discrepancies between policies and international student experiences. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(5), 851–868. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293874

Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(8), 835–854. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(98)00025-0

Jonas, S. (2021, March 19). *Instructor removed from course after exchange with student in Myanmar, York University says.* CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/york-university-instructor-myanmar-1.5955936

Jordan, J. (2010). *Relational-cultural therapy.* American Psychological Association.

Jordan, J., & Schwartz, H. (2018). Radical empathy in teaching. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 153*(2), 25–35. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20278

King, R. B., & Datu, J. A. (2017). Happy classes make happy students: Classmates' well-being predicts individual student well-being. *Journal of School Psychology, 65*, 116–128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2017.07.004

Kramer, A. D., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111*(24), 8788–8790.

Lee, J. J. (2007). Bottom line—Neo-racism toward international students. *About Campus, 11*(6), 28–30.

Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education, 53*(3), 381–409. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3

Liu, L. (2011). An international graduate student's ESL learning experience beyond the classroom. *TESL Canada Journal, 29*(1), 77–92.

Meyers, S., Rowell, K., Wells, M., & Smith, B. C. (2019). Teacher empathy: A model of empathy for teaching for student success. *College Teaching, 67*(3), 160–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2019.1579699

Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly, 38*(4), 573–603.

Myles, J., & Cheng, L. (2003). The social and cultural life of non-native English speaking international graduate students at a Canadian university. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 2*(3), 247–263.

Oropeza, M. V., Varghese, M. M., & Kanno, Y. (2010). Linguistic minority students in higher education: Using, resisting, and negotiating multiple labels. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 43*(2), 216–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665681003666304

Peck, N. F., Maude, S. P., & Brotherson, M. J. (2015). Understanding preschool teachers' perspectives on empathy: A qualitative inquiry. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 43*(3), 169–179. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0648-3

Pekrun, R., Elliot, A. J., & Maier, M. A. (2006). Achievement goals and achievement emotions: Testing a model of their joint relations with academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 101*, 115–135.

Radel, R., Sarrazin, P., Legrain, P., & Wild, T. C. (2010). Social contagion of motivation between teacher and student: Analyzing underlying processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*(3), 577.

Sahu, P. (2020). Closure of universities due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on education and mental health of students and academic staff. *Cureus, 12*(4), e7541. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541

Sakiz, G. (2012). Perceived instructor affective support in relation to academic emotions and motivation in college. *Educational Psychology, 32*(1), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2011.625611

Tavares, V. (2020). Multilingual international students from the perspective of faculty: Contributions, challenges, and support. In V. Tavares (Ed.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on international student experience in Canadian higher education* (pp. 102–119). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-5030-4.ch006

Tavares, V. (2021a). "The course is no longer great": The need for socially meaningful online instruction for international students. In R. Chan, K. Bista, & R. Allen (Eds.), *Online teaching and learning in higher education during COVID-19: International perspectives and experiences* (pp. 93–106). Routledge.

Tavares, V. (2021b). *International students in higher education: Language, identity, and experience from a holistic perspective.* Lexington Books.

Tavares, V. (2021c). Theoretical perspectives on international student identity. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 13*(2), 83–97. https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i2.2949

Tavares, V. (2022a). Neoliberalism, native-speakerism and the displacement of international students' languages and cultures. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* 1–14. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01434632.2022.2084547

Tavares, V. (2022b). Exploring the impact of notions of success based on native-speakerism, individualism and neoliberalism on ESL students' identities. In A. J. Daghigh, J. M. Jan, & S. Kaur (Eds.), *Neoliberalization of English language policy in the global south* (pp. 153–172). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92353-2_10

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. Review of Educational Research, 83(3), 357–385.

Titsworth, S., McKenna, T. P., Mazer, J. P., & Quinlan, M. M. (2013). The bright side of emotion in the classroom: Do teachers' behaviors predict students' enjoyment, hope, and pride? *Communication Education, 62*(2), 191–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2013.763997

Tran, L. T. (2020). Teaching and engaging international students: People-to-people connections and people-to-people empathy. *Journal of International Students, 10*(3), XII–XVII. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2005

Uitto, M., Lutovac, S., Jokikokko, K., & Kaasila, R. (2018). Recalling life-changing teachers: Positive memories of teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved. *International Journal of Educational Research, 87,* 47–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.11.004

Xing, D., & Bolden, B. (2021). Learning at half capacity: The academic acculturation reality experienced by Chinese international students. In V. Tavares (Ed.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on international student experience in Canadian higher education* (pp. 41–61). IGI Global.