

Tips for Working with Non-Traditional Students and English Language Learners

1. Presume nothing. Nods and attentive gazes do not necessarily equate with comprehension and task familiarity.
2. Be clear about expectations and assignments. Whether you are creating the assignment or using a guideline created by another instructor, make certain the students understand what is required to successfully complete the task. Ask students to explain what they are expected to do to successfully complete assignments – then clarify misunderstandings.
 - a. A rubric that fits the assignment will help make the demands more transparent.
 - b. Student samples of a similar assignment also give students an idea of what you are looking for. Seeing both successful and not-so-successful attempts to meet the requirements allows students to evaluate the differences and see their own work in the context of that range of papers.
3. Without hijacking the assignment, you could explain how you would tackle a similar assignment.
4. Help establish strategies that are discipline-specific. Determine the behaviors or assignments that they may practice in your field and nowhere else.
5. Practice critical thinking skills and model how you arrived at your own conclusions.
6. Provide opportunities for academic behavior exploration and practice (study skills, research skills, how to interact with faculty or peers in this setting). Help them evaluate what is working for them and what is not – and why.
7. Recognize that these students may still be in the early or middle stages of academic language acquisition.
 - a. They may have difficulty grasping directions or convoluted questions. Don't ask two questions at one time, expecting students to process them at the same time. Allow them time to think before having to answer. For example, take that sip of water. Count to five – or better yet to ten before calling on someone or rephrasing. Ask if you have been clear before rephrasing. Make it clear that the rephrasing is that – and not that you've moved on to another point.
 - b. Simply taking the responsibility for not phrasing a question or concept well may ease their anxiety for not having understood the point. That frees them to admit they don't understand and makes you more accessible to them.
 - c. Provide handouts that will guide them through any task that may be complicated.
8. Don't penalize students for a lack of confidence in writing and participating in discussions.
 - a. Allow them time to think about their answer, even jotting down their answer or posting a response to the discussion board before the class session.
 - b. Allow students to share their reactions in pairs or small groups before sharing with the class at large.
 - c. Create “confirmation checks” (e.g., some form of *entrance* or *exit tickets* where they list the major topics/concepts covered in the previous or present class, points of

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- confusion). These serve as a quick evidence collection for the learning that is actually occurring.
9. The volume of reading required in this context may be challenging. Not having a sophisticated understanding of how to read critically may complicate the process.
 - a. Acknowledge with the students the difficulty of the challenge. Let them know you recognize that your course is only one of many with equally taxing loads.
 - b. Help them develop active reading strategies. Model aloud one of your own reading sessions, showing them the questions you are actually asking while reading.
 - c. Share your own techniques for getting through the reading that you assign or readings that have been assigned to you.
 10. Provide opportunities to increase the vocabulary and language use in the academic setting.
 - a. Use the language of your discipline and define terms. Be deliberate about vocabulary introduction – plan it, highlight it when you use it (write on whiteboard), and review it periodically. As students use that discipline-specific language, acknowledge it. Let them know you notice their increased proficiency in the language of the academy.
 - b. Encourage discussions of all students, even the quiet student. Hold the students to adequately explaining their ideas, not letting them off the hook with short or shallow answers.
 - c. Students need to realize that not all answers are equally valid; providing the evidence for your own inquiry helps them recognize the need to investigate, support, and examine knowledge claims.
 11. Provide alternate “spaces” for students to interact with ideas or evaluate their level of understanding.
 - a. Course blogs, discussion boards, or wikis can provide out-of-class places to post questions or summaries of class lectures and discussions
 - b. Fostering the sense of inquiry and critical thinking can occur through encouraging questions from students. In addition to the *exit tickets* mentioned in #8, a *Question Box* can be a standard piece of furniture in the class. Students can place their questions there on a regular basis (in the middle of the class or randomly depending on the difficulty of the topic and the comprehension of the students). The anonymity empowers less confident students to pose their queries. Of course, questions must be addressed and in an attitude of openness and validation.
 12. Model and mentor the behavior of a scholar. They may never have experienced a relationship with someone who values intellectual exploration. The modeling and support for the academic enterprise may be missing for them outside the campus. So, be their advocate here!
 13. Do you have other ideas or specific practices you’ve successfully implemented? Please e-mail them to me at msmith5@ucmerced.edu and I’ll add them to this list, crediting your innovation and expertise.

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