Managing Cultural Differences

by Prof. Elizabeth L. Enriquez, Ph.D. Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs University of the Philippines Diliman

Background

The University of the Philippines attracts a good number of international students because of several strengths. Perhaps the most important is the fact that English is, and has been from its beginning a hundred years ago, its medium of instruction. English is also widely spoken by Filipinos in all walks of life. Everywhere in the country, communication and signage are in English. This is a major attraction to international students who want to learn and sharpen their English. Even to English-speaking international students, this is an advantage because they do very well inside the classroom where instruction is delivered in English.

Another factor that draws international students to UP is the comparatively low tuition fee, coupled with a low cost – not necessarily low standard – of living. College education and even postgraduate programs are affordable and students on a budget can live reasonably well while studying in UP. There are also a few scholarships available to foreign students, although the benefits are quite limited.

Because of these, UP has been host to a number of international students from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the United States. The number of foreign students enrolled in UP Diliman has almost doubled in the last four years, to around 600. This academic year, 245 foreign students are in degree programs, while the rest are in exchange programs and short-term courses.

Majority of the foreign students in the degree programs are graduate students, coming from 70 countries, the top three countries of origin being Korea, Japan, and the United States. The programs of choice are Regional Development, Environmental Engineering, and Public Administration. Students in the non-degree programs are enrolled in various courses, while most students taking short-term courses of three to six months are in Intensive English language programs.

Apart from the students, 341 international faculty members from 31 countries have taught in the various UP campuses in the last four years, with Japan, the United States, France and Australia as the countries most represented. The College of Science in UP Diliman has had the most number of foreign visiting professors.

Every year, UP Diliman organizes an average of 19 international conferences. There are academic cooperation agreements with 165 universities, with the largest number from Japan, Korea and the United States.

Needless to say, there is a lot of interaction between our students and faculty on the one hand, and foreign students and visiting professors on the other. This interaction of people coming from divergent cultures presents some challenges, which the University manages using several strategies.

I will first discuss the most common issues that I think are cultural, which present challenges to harmonious relationships among Filipinos and international students, as well as faculty. Then, I will discuss the methods which we have found to be useful and effective in enhancing relationships among everybody.

Academic setting

Let me start with the difficulties encountered in the classroom and other academic facilities. Ironically, while we think that English is one of our biggest advantages as an international university, there are quite a few complaints about the use of English as a language of instruction. The problem seems to stem from the expectation that only English is used in the classroom. UP has a bilingual policy, which means that subjects may be taught in English and/or Filipino. One approach that is considered good because it teaches students both English and Filipino is code-switching – when a professor finishes a whole sentence or a whole discussion in English, then repeats the entire discussion in Filipino. This is hard enough for some foreigners to follow, unless the foreign student is also interested in learning Filipino. The problem gets worse when the professor, instead of codeswitching, code-mixes – which means English and Filipino are used in the same sentence.

On the other hand, there are also difficulties with visiting professors whose teaching style and methods are different from ours, and who implement changes in the classroom that sometimes depart from the policies of the University. Some visiting professors are openly critical of the University and the Philippines inside the classroom. This, of course, offends Filipino students, affecting the atmosphere in class.

Another difficulty in the academic setting is the lack of state-of-the-art facilities, which foreign students from first-world countries complain about. Some colleges have very good facilities, like 24-hour computer laboratories, especially in the sciences and engineering, but not all colleges have the same provisions. As the top university in the Philippines, UP is expected to have 100% state-of-the-art facilities, but the University's reliance on state subsidy limits its capacity. Both Filipino and foreign students are frustrated at this, but Filipinos take it for granted while foreign students from developed countries are appalled.

The library is another area where foreign students have difficulties. Some foreign students complain that navigating the shelves, the card catalogs and the computer catalogs is confusing. These students find that our libraries are arranged differently from the libraries of the universities they come from. Our Filipino librarians presume that the library orientations they hold are adequate, while foreign students feel they need special orientations.

The stress of living together

Many foreign students live in a residence hall on campus called the International Center. In addition to the different nationalities of the residents, around 20% of the students in this residence hall are Filipinos. Students share a room with one or two other students, usually of different nationalities. Living in close proximity with a person whose culture you are not familiar with can pose problems. The most common is incompatibility of habits such as mismatched sleeping and waking hours and differences in hygiene practices, which are often culturally developed.

The residence hall or dorm manager has often complained of disrespect from many residents, who see her more as an employee who must attend to their needs rather than as an authority and a parent figure in the dorm. The dorm manager complains that some foreigners insist on their own beliefs in how things should be run in the dorm. This has many times resulted in antagonistic relations between the dorm manager and some foreign residents. Again this may stem from different cultural expectations of each party.

A more serious problem in the dorm may be described as racial tension. While this does not happen often, it is disturbing that it happens at all. Some residents feel that they are treated with less respect by other residents on account of the color of their skin. Such tension has produced an unpleasant atmosphere in the dorm.

A less critical problem is the lack of first-class amenities, which students from first-world countries are shocked to find out. Filipinos and other students from less developed countries are less bothered, though, from the lack of hot shower facilities, air conditioning, and the like.

Emotional difficulty

The foreign student or the visiting professor may go through periods of loneliness and homesickness. They miss seeing familiar faces, eating familiar food, and hearing the comforting sound of their own language.

Another issue is boredom especially during Christmas and other holiday seasons when Filipinos take a break and the foreign student or visiting professor is left behind in an empty campus.

Personal conflict

As we all know, living in a foreign land whose people have customs that are strange to us is stressful. The stress can sometimes get the better of some people. Personal differences across cultures sometimes erupt into personal conflicts, especially when one perceives an affront directed at his or her nationality.

A rather common source of conflict is the perception of division between Filipinos and students from developing countries on the one hand, and students from industrialized countries on the other – a "haves" and "have-nots" divide. Most of the academic agreements of UP with universities in industrialized countries provide that Filipinos pay less while the foreigners pay more for the academic exchange. The latter sometimes feel that this arrangement entitles them to more rights, which does not sit well with the former.

Filipinos often perceive many foreign students to be impatient, demanding immediate attention and expecting Filipinos to conform to the foreigner in the Philippines. Foreign students and visiting professors on the other hand complain that Filipinos are very much oriented to the American culture and lack consciousness of other cultures.

Managing cultural differences

The University administration has been encouraging and employing several strategies to smooth out cultural differences not only to protect its programs and its good name but also because of the conviction that international universities play a role in cross-cultural understanding and global peace and security. I am now going to discuss some of the practices that have helped ease cultural differences on campus.

Administrative practices

Orientations. - The colleges, the libraries, the residence halls or dormitories housing foreign students and visiting professors, and the Office of Student Activities all hold orientations not only on University rules and regulations but also on the culture of the Filipinos. In some cases, before students arrive in the Philippines, they are given orientations on living in the Philippines. Some colleges hold welcome parties for visiting professors and foreign students every year. In these parties the foreigners meet the officials of the college and the student leaders. Students from developed countries are warned about the simple living conditions on campus.

<u>Dialogue</u>. - Dialogues with visiting professors and foreign students are conducted by colleges and the management of the residence hall for foreigners, the International Center. In these dialogues, it is explained how the bureaucracy operates in the University and the country in general. In colleges where there are several foreign students, faculty coordinators hold

regular dialogues with foreign students and their Filipino classmates. The open communication prevents misunderstandings.

<u>Mediation</u>. - When conflicts arise, the faculty coordinator or the College Dean, the dormitory manager, or myself as the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, put all the parties together to peacefully resolve the disagreement. Sometimes Filipino students are part of the dispute. It is important to listen to all sides and to remind everyone that they are all equal as students of the University. They are also reminded that rules should be followed and that everyone should respect and try to understand differences.

<u>Tours and community immersion</u>. - Colleges host out-of-town activities for visiting professors and foreign students, such as historical tours and visits to famous tourist places. In courses that require field exposures and community immersion, foreign students are exposed to different places where they experience different cultures and meet all kinds of people.

<u>Curricular and extra-curricular activities</u>. - Some foreign students who prefer to be taught in Filipino are placed under professors who teach in Filipino. Also, foreign students are allowed to sit in classes in addition to their regular courses, to allow them to interact with many people of their age. Colleges host several lectures about different cultures throughout the semester. The University has many cultural activities in which foreign students are involved, such as the annual lantern parade.

Residence hall activities. - The culture of each country represented by residents in the dormitory is celebrated by holding an evening festivity once a year for every nationality. Hence, once a year there is a Japan Night, a Korea Night, a Chinese Night, and so forth, including a Filipino Night as well as an International Night. In these events are featured the food, music, dance and other aspects of the culture of the particular country being celebrated.

The residents of the International House are organized as a dorm association, which represents the residents in dialogues with administration. The dorm manager, on the other hand, firmly enforces rules while taking care to smooth out relationships among residents. The manager solves incompatibility problems by matching habits, not necessarily the nationalities, of roommates.

Homestay/hosting during holidays. - Some foreign students enrolled in short term courses are placed in the homes of Filipino families who are alumni of UP. Most of these foreign students are in Intensive English courses. Even those staying in the dormitory get a chance to stay with Filipino families, usually families of faculty and Filipino students, who adopt the foreigners during Christmas and other holidays so that they are not left behind and lonely in the dorms. By staying with Filipino families, many of them learn not only English but also Filipino. Moreover, they get to experience Filipino Christmas and other festivals.

<u>Administrative support</u>. - The college administration reminds Filipino professors and students to speak in English when there are foreigners in class.

The administrative staff provides assistance to foreign students who need help with immigration papers and other official requirements.

The role of student organizations

Student organizations play a big role in helping foreign students adjust to life in UP and in the Philippines in general. Some student organizations adopt visiting students; take them along to experience the life of young people in the Philippines; help introduce Philippine culture to the foreigners by bringing them to fiestas and similar cultural events. In return UP students gain exposure to different cultures and realize that while there are differences across cultures, they are also the same in many ways. Let me mention just a few of these organizations:

The UP Tomo-Kai assists Japanese Exchange Students in the enrolment process, which can be complicated compared with the enrolment process in Japan. The Tomo-Kai has an official newsletter, the *Tayori*. It sponsors activities like origami (Japanese art of paper-folding) demonstrations and tea ceremony. Many Japanese students are interested in learning the Filipino language.

The UP Chinese Student Association has 80 members who are Chinese, Chinese-Filipinos, and Filipinos. Their activities include cultural events like the moon cake festival, the Chinese New Year; Chinese dice games, lion dances, and dimsum eating contests. It has an official publication, the *Currents*.

The UP Arirang holds free classes in the Korean language, workshops in Korean cuisine, guided tours for Korean exchange students, speech competitions, and Korean-Filipino dance parties. Each Filipino member of the Arirang is assigned a Korean exchange student as buddy to help him or her adjust to life in the University.

The UP EURO, which stands for Euro-Filipino Understanding and Relations Organization, keeps an active tie-up with the European embassies and institutions. This organization sponsors free tutorials in the various European languages, performances showcasing European cultures, talks and lectures on Filipino-European relations, career orientations, and Foreign Service seminars.

The UP-HPAIR, which stands for UP-Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations, sponsors symposia and dialogues on student issues like the state of Philippine education and the changing nature of student activism, as well as international issues like globalization and the relationship between economic prosperity and political infrastructures.

The ICUP, which stands for International Club of UP, includes foreign students and visiting professors as well as Filipino students. It holds interesting activities like lecture and audio visual presentation on different death rituals from different cultures, a walking tour of historic places like the Chinese district called Binondo and the Muslim areas of a Manila district called Quiapo.

The AIESEC, or the International Association of Economics and Business Students, organizes study tours for foreign AIESEC members to see natural wonders and experience indigenous cultures of the Philippines; take part in home-stay immersion programs; holds lectures and workshops on business ethics, international business, project management, and environmental impact of over-consumerism; conducts joint research; participates in ASEAN trade and food fairs; and encourages the exchange of students in the ASEAN region.

ACLE (Alternative Classroom Learning Experience)

An important activity of students is the ACLE, or Alternative Classroom Learning Experience, held one day every semester. On this day, student councils and student organizations take over the classrooms from professors. Several of the topics and activities are oriented towards cultural exchange and cooperation. For example, here is a list of some alternative classes held recently:

- Chinese Culture in Hollywood
- Habla Musica (Music Talk in Spanish)
- A discussion regarding the Pangasinan Language (a Philippine language)
- Different death rituals from different cultures
- European Traditional and Contemporary Indoor and Outdoor Games
- Koreans who changed the world
- Seminar on Tai-chi: Chinese martial art of meditation
- Katutubong Pinoy: Buhay at Kabuhayan (Indigenous Filipino: Life and Living)
- Kalye Kultura (Street Culture): International Arts and Culture
- Japanese and Italian cuisine
- Sining Pinoy na may Timplang Hapon (Japanese language through film with Filipino values)

One significant source of support for the cultural activities of student organizations is the University Office for Initiatives in Culture and the Arts, or OICA. The OICA gives financial grants to help student organizations such as those mentioned above to stage performances, hold exhibits, and conduct festivals.

Some foreign students become members of our athletic varsity teams and compete in inter-university sports events. The physical activity brought about by the sport becomes a unifying link between two cultures.

Final word

Even if adjustment to one another's culture can be challenging at first, in the end, most learn not only to tolerate but to appreciate our differences

as well as similarities. Many end up as lifelong friends who keep in touch even if the program of study has ended and everyone is back in his or her country. Many adopt some cultural practices of the others and develop an understanding of the histories, character and temperament of the peoples of other nations. Most realize that cross-cultural relations are not that difficult once we have opened our hearts and minds to others.

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- Prof. Aileen SP Baviera, Ph.D., Dean, Asian Center, January 23, 2009.
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- Prof. Hercules Callanta, Dean, College of Human Kinetics, January 30, 2009.
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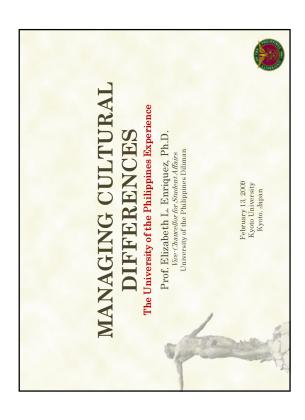
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With assistance from Ms. Maricel Rodriguez, University Research Associate, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs.



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

- 600 foreign students
- 245 foreign students from 70 countries in degree programs, the rest in exchange and short-term courses
- Korea, Japan and U.S. as top 3 countries of origin
- Programs of Choice: Regional Development, Environmental Engineering, and Public

Administration

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UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

- English as medium of instruction
- Low tuition fee
- Low cost of living
- Availability of scholarships

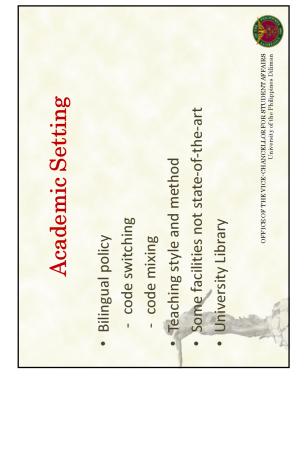
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UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

- 341 foreign faculty members from 31 countries
- Japan, United States, France and Australia as the countries most represented
- 19 international conferences annually
- 165 Academic cooperation agreements with foreign Universities
- Japan, Korea and U.S. having the largest number

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Cultural Challenges



Emotional difficulty

Loneliness and

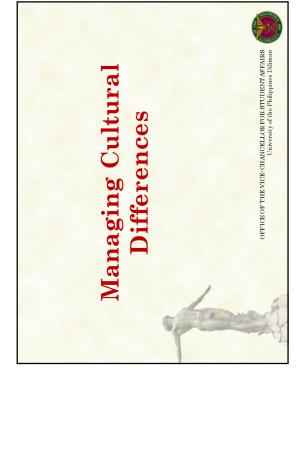
homesickness

Boredom

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Filipino orientation to the American culture

Lack of consciousness of other cultures

Division between "haves" and "have-nots"

Personal Conflict



Conducted in colleges

Dialogue

and residence halls

- Explains how the

bureaucracy operates

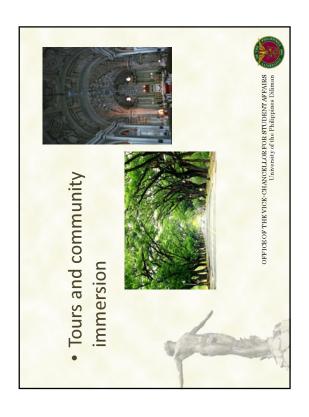
in the University and

the country in general

Regular basis to keep
open communication

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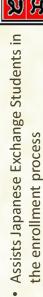




- Play a big role in helping foreign students adjust to life in UP and the Philippines in general
- Adopt visiting students
- Help foreign students to experience life of young people in the Philippines
 Help introduce Philippine culture, e.g, fiestas

and similar cultural events

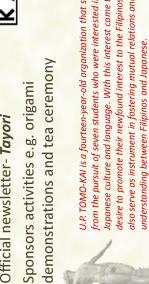
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OMO

UP Chinese Student Association

- Official newsletter- Tayori
- Sponsors activities e.g. origami















Organizes study tours for foreign AIESEC members to see

natural wonders and experience indigenous cultures

Holds lectures and workshops on business ethics, international business, project management and

environmental impact of over-consumerism

Takes part in home-stay immersion programs

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Encourages the exchange of students in the ASEAN

region

Participates in ASEAN trade and food fairs

Conducts joint research

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a walking tour on historic places like the Chinese district Binondol

and Muslim areas in a Manila

district called Quiapo

presentation on different death rituals from different cultures

lecture and audio visual

Activities

Includes visiting professors and

International Club of UP



(Japanese language through film with Filipino

values)

Sining Pinoy na may Timplang Hapon

Japanese and Italian Cuisine

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Kalye Kultura: International Arts and Culture

Seminar on Tai-chi: Chinese Martial art of

Koreans who changed the world

Examples of ACLE topics:

Katutubong Pinoy: Buhay at Kabuhayan

Meditation

(Indigenous Filipino: life and Living)

