

From Lecturer to Learner: Navigating Role Reversal in a U.S. Graduate Classroom

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; International Student and Scholar Services; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

My background is as a lecturer in mass communication in Bangladesh. In order to pursue a masters degree in Educational Leadership and Societal Change, I moved to the U.S. and became a graduate student. In Bangladesh, I was used to standing at the front of a classroom, guiding students through lectures, and managing large classes of forty or more. Upon arrival, I was on the other side of the classroom, no longer the teacher but a student.

Case

At my U.S. university, I am the only student from Bangladesh. While diversity is celebrated, the absence of peers with similar cultural backgrounds often leaves me feeling isolated. Friends from Nigeria, the Philippines, and Uzbekistan share similar experiences, each of us adapting in our own way while missing our food, language, and sense of belonging. Upon arrival, we attended a rigorous week of orientation, but none of the sessions allowed us to voice our emotional or cultural needs. We were told about coping with culture shock but never given space to express what that felt like.

As an international student, I have to manage the practical realities of living in a new country: finding on-campus employment, obtaining a Social Security Number, and adapting to unfamiliar systems. These

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pressures exist alongside my coursework and emotional adjustment. In addition, many graduate students, including myself, arrived with years of professional experience, yet we receive the same hourly wage as undergraduate students, about \$16 per hour for on-campus jobs. For international students managing living expenses in California, this income barely covers basic costs. This situation reveals a more profound concern: institutional structures sometimes overlook the financial and personal realities of international graduate students, particularly those who are older or supporting families.

Challenges extend into the classroom. Although my professors and classmates are welcoming and kind, everything around me felt unfamiliar at first. The pedagogy, the classroom structure, and even the rhythm of academic life are all different. My classes in the U.S. often have only six students and last for three hours, compared to the one-hour lectures I used to give back home. With smaller classes, there is no place to hide. Engagement is constant, reflection is profound, and silence feels heavier. The American classroom encourages open discussion, continuous participation, and critical questioning. In contrast, the Bangladeshi classroom is hierarchical, structured, memorization-based, and exam-oriented. I initially found it overwhelming to speak up so often or to be challenged by peers. Back home, silence is a form of respect; here, it is perceived as disengagement.

This shift forced me to rethink my understanding of what it means to “learn” and to “lead.” I realized that leadership in education is not about holding authority but about creating shared spaces for growth. The participatory learning culture I encountered taught me that every voice contributes to the collective understanding. Gradually, I began to engage more, not by abandoning my cultural identity, but by integrating the respectful listening of my past with the active dialogue of my present.

Through this transition, I have come to see education as a continuous act of cultural negotiation and self-discovery. The move from lecturer to learner reshaped not only my understanding of pedagogy but also my sense of self. It reminded me that openness, vulnerability, and adaptability are essential qualities of effective leadership and cross-cultural learning.

I also realized that institutions could better support international students by creating spaces for emotional connection, pedagogical orientation, and intercultural learning. Integration is not just academic; it is also personal, social, and deeply human.

In this journey of adjustment and self-discovery, I recently joined the Graduate Executive Council of my university. This role provides an opportunity to contribute to building the very sense of community and support I once longed for. My personal transition into student leadership and shared governance reminds me that the most meaningful learning occurs when we use our experiences to empower others.

Today, I see my journey not as losing one identity for another, but as gaining the ability to move fluidly between them. My experience as a Bangladeshi lecturer and an American graduate student has taught me that true leadership begins with empathy and the willingness to understand and value both sides of the classroom.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can universities design orientation programs that address not just logistics but also the emotional and cultural needs of international students?
- How can universities continue to provide support to their international students throughout their program, beyond the orientation?
- In what ways can institutions recognize and value the professional experience of international graduate students?
- How should compensation rates for on-campus jobs be established? Are the needs of the specific employees relevant? What expectations about on-campus employment should be communicated to international students in advance of their arrival?
- What actions can be taken by newly-arrived international students to help them adjust to a new teaching environment? What steps can the university, the faculty, and the host country students take to offer support?
- How might educators adapt their teaching practices to bridge the gap between hierarchical and participatory learning cultures?
- How can international students advocate for themselves and each other?