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Autoethnographic Reflections of Constructivist and Student-Centred Teaching in Internationalised Undergraduate Classrooms

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges and opportunities of teaching in internationalized undergraduate classrooms at a South Korean university. Drawing on autoethnography, reflexive pedagogy, and constructivist learning, it examines how student-led and reflexive approaches can lead to more inclusive learning environments. Through classroom examples, including discussions on media framing, privilege, and cultural assumptions, the paper illustrates how constructivist and student-centred pedagogies disrupt traditional learning hierarchies. It argues that reflexivity is essential in global education, enabling both students and educators to critically engage with power structures in the classroom. Ultimately, this study calls for a pedagogical shift that places students' lived experiences at the centre of the learning process, challenging educators to move toward co-constructed and socially engaged education.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Reflexive pedagogy can be used to help students identify and critically examine the cultural and epistemic assumptions that shape their understanding of knowledge.
2. Constructivist learning approaches, such as discussion-based activities and reflective writing, enable students to build understanding through their own lived experiences and perspectives.
3. Structured opportunities for dialogue allow students to compare cultural viewpoints, making classroom learning a collaborative process of knowledge construction.
4. Moments of discomfort in multicultural classrooms can support learning when they are carefully facilitated and followed by guided reflection.
5. Ongoing reflexive teaching practices help educators adapt to diverse classrooms by continuously examining their own positionality and pedagogical assumptions.

Keywords

Reflexive Pedagogy, Constructivist Learning, Internationalised Classrooms

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Introduction

Teaching in a classroom filled with students from around the world is both an opportunity and a challenge. Every day, I witness how cultural perspectives shape the way students approach knowledge. This includes what they see as valid, what they dismiss, and what they hesitate to question. These encounters raise fundamental questions: How do we teach in ways that respect and integrate the diverse perspectives students bring, while also challenging entrenched paradigms of knowledge and learning?

These concerns emerge from the lived experiences of students and faculty navigating an educational system that, like many others, is still shaped by historical and institutional biases. Santos (2018) argues that decolonising education requires validating diverse ways of knowing rather than reinforcing a singular epistemic hierarchy. In a similar vein, Eriksen (2022) emphasises the need for reflexivity in teaching and research, particularly in confronting epistemic violence and the lingering effects of colonial education. A longstanding approach to addressing these inequities is culturally relevant pedagogy, which Ladson-Billings (1995) conceptualised as a model that specifically targets students' cultural identities and critical consciousness. That is, equitable and impactful learning environments must make great efforts to integrate students' lived experiences (Walker, 2019), centring them in their own education.

This article is organised around two central concepts: reflexive pedagogy and constructivist learning. Reflexive pedagogy provides a lens for examining how students and educators become aware of the cultural and epistemic assumptions that shape learning, while constructivist learning explains how students actively build understanding through dialogue, reflection, and lived experience.

I have seen the practical relevance of these discussions firsthand in two undergraduate courses that I often teach, Introduction to Anthropology and Introduction to Korean Popular Culture. I have taught both of these courses, most recently, at a South Korean university, where students bring diverse backgrounds and expectations to the classroom. Specifically, some enter with a strong grounding in Eurocentric academic traditions; others instinctively approach learning through a more hierarchical model, where knowledge is to be absorbed rather than debated. In this context, I have found that structuring courses around culturally situated and student-centred approaches offers a compelling way to navigate these tensions. Through weekly reflection questions and open-ended discussions, students are invited to examine their own assumptions about knowledge, culture, and learning itself. Here, students are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge, instead of simple recipients of information.

I have chosen autoethnography as a lens for representing these classroom dynamics. In writing about my experiences as both a researcher and an educator, I try to engage in the same kind of reflexivity I encourage in my students. The classroom, in this sense, becomes both a pedagogical space and an ethnographic field site: a place where the complexities of identity and power unfold in real time. In taking this approach, I follow calls that emphasise reflexive methodologies as particularly important in internationalized education, where tensions between epistemic traditions frequently arise. For example, Rashid and Khan (2023) argue that reflexivity is essential in international educational contexts to ensure equitable collaborations, rather than reproducing hierarchical knowledge flows. Similarly, R'boul (2022) highlights how the geopolitics of knowledge in higher education often reinforces Western epistemic dominance, necessitating a more reflexive

and intercultural approach that values other ways of knowing. My work builds on this by demonstrating how autoethnographic and inquisitive approaches can offer a concrete pedagogical model that prioritises critical engagement and cultural plurality.

At the same time, I remain sceptical of the assumption that internationalization inherently fosters equity. As Bamberger and Morris (2024) contend, internationalization in higher education has often been framed as a progressive and equitable process. However, in practice, said internationalization frequently reinforces existing power hierarchies, privileging Western epistemologies and marginalising alternative ways of knowing. They highlight that much of what is labelled as 'global education' remains embedded in a commercialised model that perpetuates Western dominance, limiting the transformative potential of internationalization to challenge entrenched inequalities. Connell (2020) similarly critiques the erasure of Global South epistemologies, showing how dominant institutions continue to reinforce epistemic hierarchies even under the guise of inclusivity. In my courses explored in this article, I try to counter these tendencies by embedding counter-narratives into classroom practices. Weekly reflection prompts—such as "What cultural assumptions influence your understanding of this topic?" or "How does your background shape your interpretation of this week's readings?"—encourage students to think critically about their own positionalities, moving beyond passive consumption of knowledge toward more engaged, self-reflective inquiry.

Ultimately, this paper argues for a reflexive and constructivist pedagogical model that places students' lived experiences at the centre of the learning process. Here, I intend on showing how education can become a space for critical engagement, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Literature

Reflexive and Constructivist Pedagogy in Internationalised Classrooms

Teaching in any internationalized classroom requires more than simply delivering content. While this could be said for any classroom, internationalised contexts inherently bring questions surrounding the complexities of knowledge: what counts as valid, who gets to decide, and how students come to understand the world through the lenses they have inherited. Because students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with breadths of biases, values, and beliefs that are unfamiliar to their classmates, education can be as much about unlearning as learning. It is a process of unsettling assumptions, making space for marginalised knowledge systems; not to mention re-examining my own position as an educator.

In the context of this article, critical cultural reflexivity and constructivist pedagogy provide key tools driving this education. Students should be helped to interrogate their own perspectives while challenging dominant frameworks that shape academic discourse (Sultana, 2019). In my classrooms, students often hesitate when confronted with perspectives that contradict what they have been taught to see as authoritative knowledge. However, when given the space to reflect and connect theories with their lived realities, many develop deeper, more critical understandings of something that they may have previously taken for granted.

At the heart of this philosophy is the recognition that knowledge is never neutral. The ways we think, analyse, and interpret the world are shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional forces (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). Patel (2016) argues that reflexivity in education requires a

fundamental questioning of the power structures embedded in knowledge production. Practically in the classroom, this means prompting students to reflect on how their cultural backgrounds shape their interpretations of course materials; often texts and academic theories. These discussions often lead to moments of realisation, where (ideally) students recognise, for the first time, the extent to which particular epistemologies have shaped their education, while others struggle with the discomfort of questioning deeply held beliefs. Easier said than done.

I believe that this pedagogy takes great influence from decolonial education, which emphasises the need for pedagogies that foreground Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This involves creating space for students to bring their own cultural frameworks into discussion, not as supplementary perspectives, but as equally valid knowledge. Hussain and Saloi (2024) highlight how dominant epistemologies shape academic discourse, determining whose histories are told and whose perspectives are marginalised. In this context, reflexivity becomes a crucial means of interrogating these power structures, essentially inquiring “How do we know what we know”. Structuring course materials around these ideas, and encouraging students to critically engage with these questions, has reshaped my own understanding of teaching, turning the classroom into a space of co-learning rather than one-way instruction.

Constructivist Pedagogy: Learning as a Collaborative Process

If reflexivity allows students to interrogate dominant frameworks (in other words, how do we know), constructivist pedagogy provides a model for actively re-engaging with knowledge on their own terms. A constructivist approach recognises that students do not arrive as empty vessels waiting to be filled; rather, they bring their own experiences, insights, and ways of knowing into the classroom. Here, learning is an active and iterative process in which students build new understandings questioning prior knowledge with new, unfamiliar insights (Brau, 2018). This approach is particularly significant in multicultural educational settings, where students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence how they interpret knowledge and engage with learning (Ashrafova, 2024).

In practice, this means shifting away from traditional, performance-based educational models toward more dialogic, student-centred approaches. Many students enter the classroom accustomed to rote memorisation (especially in Korea where the national university entrance exam is structured this way), structured lectures, and standardised assessments. When it comes to asking students to engage in open-ended discussions and critical self-reflection, they often are challenged to rethink knowledge production itself. Whether this is through validating diverse and often marginalised perspectives (Connell, 2020), or having students engage with content through their own cultural lenses (Gay, 2018), it requires a fundamental restructuring of how knowledge is produced and shared.

One of the key ways that this can unfold in the classroom is through dialogic engagement, where students critically examine concepts by juxtaposing them with their own interpretations of the same concepts. Nystrand et al. (2003) emphasise that high-quality classroom discourse is characterised by substantive reciprocity between teachers and students; an environment where learners actively participate in the construction of knowledge. Within a constructivist framework, this means guiding students to recognise not just what they are learning but why certain perspectives have been privileged over others (again, in a similar vein to how decolonial

approaches encourages us to decenter dominant traditions and incorporate alternative knowledge systems into classroom discussions).

For example, when signing up for a course on Korean popular culture, students often bring pre-existing notions on the subject. Students may intend to learn about theories that could, for example, explain the soft power of the K-wave (Hallyu, 한류). However, I contend that it is just as useful, if not more, to start a course like this by finding out what students generally know about Korean pop culture, and then going from there. Humphrey et al. (2015) emphasise that constructivist pedagogy is most effective when it draws on students' own semiotic resources—the languages, symbols, and cultural frameworks they already possess. In other words, by allowing students to start from their own perspectives instead of those of another (e.g., theory), the classroom becomes a space where knowledge is not only transmitted but co-constructed, validating alternative epistemologies in a way that traditional academic models often overlook (Chuaungo & Mishra, 2022).

Ultimately, constructivist pedagogy complements the reflexive framework by operationalising its principles within classroom practice. While reflexivity encourages students to question epistemic hierarchies, constructivism provides the tools for engaging with knowledge beyond critique, turning reflection into an active and participatory learning process. This dynamic approach not only enhances student engagement but also challenges the traditional hierarchies of education, making space for plural ways of knowing (Chuaungo & Mishra, 2022). In this paper, constructivism and reflexivity are combined into one model. This combination provides the pedagogical process through which reflexive awareness becomes classroom practice: students bring their own cultural assumptions into dialogue, test them against other perspectives, and reconstruct their understanding through shared inquiry.

Method

This study is based on my own reflections as a professor in teaching culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse undergraduate classes in South Korea. My approach is in part ethnographic, drawing on the everyday realities of the classroom as both a site of pedagogy and a field of inquiry. Teaching in an internationalized academic environment is far from neutral, as it necessarily involves navigating varying beliefs and values, expectations, hierarchies, and more.

The material for this study is drawn from my ongoing teaching practice, including weekly teaching reflections, observations of classroom interactions, and retrospective engagement with course activities. This methodology is focused on situating my own pedagogical experiences within broader institutional and epistemological contexts. The primary subject of analysis is my own pedagogical practice and positionality as an educator, with classroom interactions serving as context for reflexive interpretation rather than as data to be analysed in their own right.

Importantly, as a foreign professor in South Korea, I occupy a dual position that complicates my role in the classroom. This insider-outsider role shapes everything from how students perceive my authority in the classroom, to how discussions unfold. Shim (2018) underscores the importance of reflexivity in navigating these complexities, highlighting how cultural assumptions, academic hierarchies, and institutional structures intersect in cross-cultural teaching contexts. Here, reflexivity allows me to critically examine how my own background influences the ways I structure courses, select readings, and assess student engagement.

Autoethnography further deepens this methodological approach by integrating personal experience with broader sociocultural analysis. Autoethnography is a mode of inquiry that situates the researcher's lived experiences within larger cultural frameworks (Shim, 2018). Pollock (2000) describes autobiographies as social acts that respond to and reproduce the conditions in which they are written. In this way, autoethnography allows me to critically examine how my teaching is shaped by—and in turn shapes—the institutional and cultural structures in which I work.

However, autoethnography is not without its challenges. Shim (2018) critiques the tendency to frame subjective narratives as neutral truths, cautioning against oversimplification. To address this concern, I draw on multiple forms of reflection, including teaching notes, theoretical engagement, and classroom experience, to develop a richer and more reflexive account of practice.

At the same time, the emotional dimensions of teaching cannot be overlooked. Villa Rojas (2020) discusses the affective labour involved in teaching, from navigating student disengagement to confronting one's own vulnerabilities in the classroom. Reflexivity helps me work through these moments, particularly when discomfort emerges, which can often become some of the more important teaching moments.

This approach is also tied to a broader commitment to equity and epistemic justice. While this is informed by work on student agency (Kim, 2019), the focus here is on how students engage with their own assumptions and participate in dialogue across different perspectives. In my teaching, this also means moving away from more idealised portrayals of Korea and instead engaging with issues such as inequality, colonial legacies, and cultural hybridity (Saeji, 2018).

Practically, this requires ongoing adjustment in the classroom. As Villa Rojas (2020) suggests, responding to student disengagement and cultural differences is not fixed. This includes using more participatory approaches, being open to vulnerability as an instructor, and allowing discussion to develop in ways that are not always predictable. Rather than treating teaching as the delivery of fixed knowledge, it becomes something more shaped by interaction, where students play a more active role in how learning unfolds.

Through this reflexive ethnographic approach, the classroom becomes both a site of inquiry and a space for co-constructing knowledge. This methodology underscores the transformative potential of culturally situated pedagogy in addressing epistemic justice, fostering equity, and validating students' lived experiences. By placing reflexivity at the centre of this research, I not only engage with the goals of decolonial education but also highlight the complexities and possibilities of teaching in cross-cultural and internationalized settings.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on autoethnographic reflection, with the primary focus on my own pedagogical practices, experiences, and positionality as an educator. While classroom interactions and student contributions inform these reflections, no identifiable student data is collected, analysed, or presented. All examples are anonymized and, where necessary, composite in nature to ensure that individual students cannot be recognised.

Formal institutional ethics approval was not sought, as the study does not involve systematic data collection from human participants but instead draws on retrospective reflection on teaching

practice. This approach aligns with established forms of reflective and autoethnographic research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, where the educator's experience serves as the primary site of analysis.

Nonetheless, ethical considerations remain central to this work. In representing classroom experiences, I have prioritised the protection of student identities and aimed to avoid any portrayal that could disadvantage or misrepresent individuals or groups.

Discussion

This section explores key themes that have emerged from my experiences teaching culturally diverse undergraduate courses in South Korea. The insights presented here are drawn from classroom discussions, student reflections, and my own ongoing engagement with reflexive pedagogy. The analysis is organised around four classroom examples: media bias and critical engagement, privilege and social background, storytelling through Quick Writes, and intercultural confrontation. Across these examples, I examine how reflexive pedagogy and constructivist learning operate in practice: first, by making students' assumptions visible; second, by connecting academic concepts to lived experience; and third, by using dialogue and discomfort as opportunities for reconstructed understanding.

Media Biases and Critical Engagement

Media is one of the most powerful tools in shaping how people perceive the world. It frames issues, influences discourse, and reinforces dominant ideologies; sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly. In my Introduction to Anthropology course, I introduce students to the concept of framing, which examines how the same event can be presented in radically different ways depending on the ideological position of the storyteller. To illustrate this, I show the picture below about undocumented immigrants receiving scholarships in the United States: one framing it as an act of inclusion and opportunity, the other as an unjust misallocation of resources.

Audience matters. Fox News Latino vs Fox News (Media Matters – 8 Aug 2014) https://twitter.com/mmfa/status/497856477802278912. Retrieved from: https://criticalmediareview.wordpress.com/2015/10/19/what-is-media-framing/.

The shift in tone between the two frames is immediately striking to students, many of whom have never consciously thought about how media constructs reality.

I build on this provocation by tasking students with finding a news story from their own culture and analysing how it is framed. This assignment always brings a fascinating range of examples. For example, one student from Southeast Asia explored how environmental activists were portrayed as either national heroes or economic threats, depending on the publication. Another, from Eastern Europe, analysed how protests in their country were framed in the media: either as democratic movements or as destabilizing forces threatening national security. These assignments remind me that the mechanisms of framing are not limited to Western media; they are global, influencing how societies perceive themselves and each other.

Analytically, this activity enacts reflexive pedagogy by asking students to identify the assumptions through which media narratives become believable or authoritative. It also reflects constructivist learning because students do not simply receive a theory of framing; they build an understanding of framing by comparing examples from their own cultural contexts.

This activity illustrates reflexive pedagogy by making students' assumptions about media and truth visible, prompting them to question how knowledge is framed within their own cultural contexts. At the same time, it reflects constructivist learning, as students build understanding through comparison, discussion, and the sharing of examples from their own backgrounds rather than receiving a fixed interpretation.

In another anthropology class, I shift the discussion from news framing to media representation across cultures. I often begin with an observation that is familiar to many students: in American

spy thriller films, Russians are frequently cast as villains, a trope that has persisted long after the Cold War. With several Russian students in the classroom, I ask how they feel about this portrayal. Their responses are often eye-opening. Not only do they immediately recognise these stereotypes (they often laugh about it or roll their eyes), but they also share examples of how Americans are caricatured similarly as villains in Russian media depictions. One student even introduced the class to a satirical cartoon titled Crazy Russian (Дурацкий русский), which depicts Americans as fat, self-absorbed, and in many other derogatory ways. I ask other students about how their own cultures are stereotyped, and to show the class (if they wish) examples of such representations. The ensuing discussion is always rich, revealing how no country is immune to stereotyping others. These conversations are particularly powerful because they challenge students to move beyond a critique of Western media and instead consider how different societies construct narratives about each other.

In my Introduction to Korean Popular Culture class, I often get students explore historical media representations and their implications today. One of the most compelling examples we analyse is how Japanese colonial-era ethnographies framed Koreans as culturally and biologically similar to the Japanese; a narrative used to justify assimilation during colonial rule (1910-1945). Japanese ethnologists at the time claimed that Korea and Japan shared the same minzoku (race or ethnic identity), emphasising their "oneness" to rationalise unification under Japanese rule (Cho'e, 2003; Kim, 2017; Walraven, 1999). Early Japanese anthropological studies, including those influenced by European ethnology, positioned Korea as an extension of Japan, portraying its culture as both backward and in need of modernisation through colonial governance. This served to legitimise Japanese rule while simultaneously weakening Korean cultural identity by labelling indigenous traditions such as shamanism as superstitious and outdated.

By analysing how colonial-era ethnographies distorted Korean identity, students begin to recognise the broader mechanisms through which dominant powers construct narratives about "others" to serve political, economic, or ideological interests. Despite being a class centred on "Korean culture", this exercise broadens the discussion, prompting students to think about what Korean culture really is, and how we know about it. For instance, a Korean student once shared their frustration with the ways American media often exoticizes Korean culture, reducing it to a blend of K-pop, hanboks (traditional clothing), and street food, while overlooking deeper historical and social contexts. Another student from Europe observed how their country's history was frequently flattened into narratives of war and conflict, neglecting its contributions to art, philosophy, or science. Similarly, students from Southeast Asia noted how their nations were often portrayed in terms of poverty and political instability, rather than as dynamic, evolving societies with rich cultural legacies. These discussions highlight how media representation is not neutral but a collection of specific worldviews, making it imperative for students to approach media critically, both as consumers and as future cultural producers.

One of the most striking moments in my teaching came during a class discussion on media censorship. In an activity based on Vera Kennedy's Beyond Race: Cultural Influences on Human Social Life (2018, 5), we analysed American music artist Childish Gambino's music video This is America, an audio-visual critique of race, violence, and politics in the United States. I then asked students to find comparable media artefacts from their own cultural contexts for a take-home activity, to be shared later. While many students shared politically charged songs or films, a student from a country with more comprehensive media restrictions contacted me outside of

class, saying that they could not do the activity due to a lack of similar representations of their culture. The student told me: “If someone made a video like this (criticizing the government) about my country, they would be arrested.” This moment underscored the vastly different realities of media freedom that exist worldwide and opened up a discussion on the structural limitations that shape public discourse.

Another example that consistently sparks debate is our discussion on North Korea in Western media. As it is a class on Korean popular culture, I devote a unit to discussing how North Korean culture is portrayed in the media. I begin by showing students a collection of sensationalized Western headlines depicting North Korea as a monolithic threat. Then, I present North Korean movie trailers, which tell an entirely different story—one of national pride and self-reliance. The movies include The Schoolgirl's Diary (한 녀학생의 일기) and On the Green Carpet (푸른 주단우에서), as suggested in a reading I assign from Kim-Yoon and Williams (2015). Many students find the movie trailers and clips to be peculiar, looking outdated, being unclear about their plot direction, or having an off-putting sense of humour. Interestingly, each semester I can almost always count on my Russian students in the class to note similarities between North Korean films and Soviet-era cinema, highlighting overlaps in aesthetic, tone, and humour. Other students, particularly those unfamiliar with state-controlled media, find these representations almost surreal. I use these points to show students that media representations are never neutral; instead, they are always embedded in the socio-political contexts in which they are produced.

What makes these activities meaningful is that they not only get students to critically engage with media representations, but also transform the classroom into a space of shared discovery. Rather than treating media bias as an abstract concept, students experience it firsthand, grappling with how their own cultures are framed in global narratives. Students examine how framing, bias, and representation function across different contexts, and begin to see the constructed nature of media narratives, reinforcing the need for critical inquiry and intercultural empathy. These activities therefore connect reflexivity and constructivism: students become aware of the cultural conditions shaping representation while also constructing knowledge through comparative dialogue.

Privilege and Social Background

Privilege often operates invisibly, shaping opportunities and access in ways that are easily overlooked by those who benefit from it. In my anthropology class, I introduce students to Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, which frame privilege as deeply embedded in social structures. The theoretical introduction of this unit always begins with one key idea: privilege is often unconscious, particularly for those who possess it. From there, we move into more practical and personal explorations of privilege, using Vera Kennedy’s “Test Your Life Chances” activity (2018, 32) as a centrepiece for critical reflection.

Kennedy’s questionnaire asks students to tally “plus” and “minus” points based on their life experiences. The questions cover a range of factors, from whether their parents owned a home to whether they have faced discrimination due to their gender, race, or socioeconomic status. The simplicity of the exercise belies its power; as students work through the list, an air of quiet introspection fills the room. Some students breeze through the questions with relative ease, while

others pause, grappling with painful memories or realising for the first time how their experiences fit into a broader social framework.

The results are always striking. Some students tally an overwhelming number of “pluses”, while others see their “minus” column fill up. This disparity leads to fascinating discussions about privilege as a lived reality for some, and not for others. For instance, a student from a wealthy family in East Asia once shared how their parents’ connections had smoothed their path into a prestigious international school. In contrast, another student from a rural background in South Asia reflected on how their village’s lack of access to clean water had shaped their childhood experience, mired in poverty.

As we discuss the varying results or the pluses and minuses, I always encourage students to consider the cultural specificity of the questionnaire itself. Kennedy’s activity was written for an American context and audience, where factors like race and immigrant status carry particular weight. In a classroom full of students from diverse cultural and national backgrounds, the relevance of these questions varies. For example, one question asks whether students’ ancestors were forced to migrate. For a student from Eastern Europe, this question sparked a conversation about historical expulsions during World War II, while for a Korean student, it led to a discussion of Japanese colonialism. Some students could not see the relevance of such questions at all due to their country being relatively culturally and racially homogeneous. The point here is that these moments highlight the limits of the activity’s design while also opening up opportunities for students to critically engage with it. This is where the activity becomes reflexive. Students are not only measuring their privilege, but they are questioning the cultural assumptions embedded in the instrument itself.

One semester, a student from a politically-authoritarian country shared that the idea of “life chances” felt foreign to them. In their home country, where government control pervades every aspect of life, even the concept of individual opportunity is filtered through systemic constraints. Another student pointed out that the activity’s focus on individual experiences overlooks collective privileges, such as access to subsidised housing or public education, that are normalised in their home country. These critiques are invaluable, pushing the class to think beyond the activity’s framework and adapt it to better reflect the diversity of their experiences.

One of the most powerful aspects of this exercise is how it brings intersectionality into focus. Privilege, as discussed, is rarely a simple binary of “haves” and “have-nots.” It is often shaped by the intersections of race, gender, class, nationality, and countless other factors. A student from an affluent family may still face discrimination due to their gender, while another from a less privileged background may benefit from majority ethnic status in their home country. These layers of privilege and disadvantage, when shared openly in class, foster empathy and mutual understanding among students.

By the end of the exercise, I ask students to reflect not only on their own scores but also on the broader social systems that shape these outcomes. What makes the differences between your classmates’ scores, even those from the same country as you? This is where the conversation often circles back to Bourdieu. Students begin to see how cultural capital, such as access to books, museums, or international travel, translates into social capital and, eventually, into opportunities. For instance, a student whose parents encouraged them to attend the symphony

as a child may now realise how those early experiences cultivate the skills and tastes that allow them to navigate elite social spaces with ease.

The constructivist dimension of the activity lies in this shared reinterpretation. Students collectively revise the meaning of privilege by bringing different cultural, national, and classed experiences into conversation. This could also be forms of privilege not asked about on the questionnaire, as even the course materials, in my mind, should be critically evaluated by the students. Through these discussions, the classroom transforms into a space of shared reflection and critical inquiry. Privilege is no longer an abstract concept but a lens through which students view their own lives and the lives of their peers. The stories and critiques underscore the richness of learning in a multicultural classroom. These conversations equip them to challenge the inequalities embedded in their own societies. For me, as their instructor, these moments are a reminder of the power of education to illuminate and disrupt the invisible structures that shape our lives.

Analytically, this exercise becomes reflexive when students begin to interrogate not only their own positions but also the assumptions embedded in the activity itself. Rather than treating privilege as a fixed measure, they question how it is defined across different cultural contexts. This process is also constructivist, as students collectively build a more nuanced understanding of privilege through shared discussion and comparison.

Storytelling and Reflection as a Pedagogical Bridge

Put directly, assignments must be more than merely exercises to regurgitate and summarise information, especially in the context of AI. My contention is that they must be intentionally designed to bridge the gap between theory and lived experience. I have never been a fan of professors who rely on rote memorisation as a measure of understanding. Instead, I firmly believe that anthropology, and cultural studies more broadly, is best learned through consistent engagement, reflection, and self-awareness. This belief is especially pertinent in South Korea, where the education system has a legacy of emphasising rote learning and standardised testing (Seth, 2002). My goal has always been to subvert this norm, not only for my Korean students, who are accustomed to this approach, but also for my international students, who bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the classroom.

To achieve this, I structure a significant portion of my course evaluation around a series of weekly assignments called “Quick Writes.” I first encountered this pedagogical approach during my doctoral studies, where my supervisor used it to encourage reflection and critical thinking in her own classes that I served as a teaching assistant for. Recognising its potential, I adopted it as a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy. The Quick Writes are simple yet serve a central goal: reflection-based questions that challenge students to link the day’s lecture material to their own cultural experiences. Conceptually, the Quick Writes represent the clearest application of constructivist learning in this study. Students are not asked to reproduce theoretical knowledge, but to construct it through reflection on their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social positions. In doing so, they also engage in reflexive pedagogy, as repeated self-reflection makes their assumptions and positionalities visible over time.

Quick Writes in Anthropology: Connecting the Personal to the Theoretical

In my anthropology class, the Quick Writes are tailored to the core themes of the discipline, such as identity, kinship, social constructs, and globalisation. The questions are deliberately designed to draw students into introspection. For example:

- Describe your own culture and background. What makes your culture unique? Give personal examples.
- In the future career that you want to do, can understanding culture help? Why or why not?
- How would you rate your own amount of privilege? Describe the advantages and disadvantages your background or social class gives you in your life.
- Describe some of the social groups that you are in. How do they change and shape your identity?
- Describe how kinship and family are unique in your culture, neighbourhood, or even your specific family. Does your family have specific social roles? How does this relate to your culture?
- Describe some social constructs from your own culture that would not be the same in another place.
- How have globalisation and multiculturalism affected you and your culture?
- Describe cultural concepts that are embedded in your native language. How does the meaning of these change when they are translated into another language?
- Describe the cultures of gift-giving and reciprocity in your culture, giving examples. Is this unique?
- What are rituals and beliefs that are a part of your culture or background? How can an outsider understand these?
- How are ideas about life and death related to your culture?

I tell students on the first day of class that the best answers are ones that draw on personal experiences and stories from their past, childhood, or memories. The effectiveness of these questions lies in their personal nature. Students are invited to reflect on their lives, instead of recalling definitions and theories (although the latter is certainly encouraged to be integrated). I remember one student from Southeast Asia who, when asked to describe cultural constructs embedded in their native language, shared how certain idioms reflected community values. Another student from Europe compared kinship roles in their culture to those discussed in class, reflecting on how their family's emphasis on egalitarian relationships differed from the hierarchical kinship systems we studied.

These Quick Writes also work as a kind of bridge between students' own experiences and the broader anthropological ideas we are discussing. In many cases, this is where the material starts to make more sense to them. For example, when we talk about social constructs, students begin to see how things like gender, class, or race actually shape their everyday interactions, often in ways they had not really thought about before.

One student, reflecting on growing up in a collectivist culture, described how their sense of self was closely tied to family obligations, which connected quite directly to our discussions on kinship and identity. Another student from North America, writing about globalisation, pointed to their bilingual upbringing as something that reflected the shifting cultural dynamics of their community. These kinds of reflections are important because they show how students are not just engaging with abstract concepts, but also locating themselves within them.

In this sense, these moments do more than just increase engagement. They shift how learning happens in the classroom. Rather than remaining passive, students begin to construct knowledge through their own experiences, while also bringing different perspectives into the discussion. This, at times, changes the direction of the conversation itself.

Quick Writes in Korean Popular Culture: Bridging Cultures

In my Korean popular culture class, I adapt the Quick Writes to connect students' personal experiences to the material about Korean culture. While the course focuses on a specific culture, the assignments encourage students to draw comparisons with their own cultural contexts. Some examples include:

- Describe your cultural background. Why do you want to learn about Korean culture? How can it enhance your cultural understanding?
- Do you think understanding history is important to understand culture? Give examples from your own culture.
- Describe rituals and traditions from your own culture. How have they changed over time?
- The concepts of jeong, chemyeon, han, and others are uniquely Korean. Do you have concepts from your own culture that convey the same meanings (e.g., love, face, anger/sadness)? What do you think of these concepts?
- Compare and contrast North Korean culture with South Korean culture and other countries. What do you find most interesting and why? Can you connect North Korean cultural elements to others that you know?
- What makes social problems, such as suicide, unique to South Korea? Are there social problems in your country that can be understood with culture?
- Education relates strongly to history and culture in Korea. Describe this relationship, comparing and contrasting with education where you are from.
- Describe the connection between Korean culture and gender roles, comparing and contrasting with other contexts.
- People with disabilities face large stigma and barriers in South Korean society. Explain these, their connections to culture, and compare them to your own culture/society.
- How do modern beauty standards connect to Korean culture? What is your experience as a foreigner living within these beauty standards?
- In your opinion, is the K-wave just a trend? Or is it sustainable? Are we at its peak or has its peak already passed? Draw on your experiences, contrasting with how your country's culture has been exported abroad.

These questions reveal fascinating insights. For example, one student from Latin America discussed how the Korean concept of jeong (정) resonated with their own cultural emphasis on familial closeness but differed in their communal applications. Another student reflected on how globalisation had introduced Korean beauty ideals into their home country, influencing local trends in fashion and cosmetics.

One particularly memorable reflection came from a student who compared the sustainability of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) to their country's struggles to export cultural products. Their analysis explored not only economic and structural differences but also cultural attitudes toward art and media production. Through these assignments, students engage in critical self-reflection, using their own cultural narratives to better understand Korean culture while simultaneously gaining

insights into their own identities. Although the course is evidently about Korean culture, it is framed through the students' own cultural lenses.

Tools for Self-Reflection and Positionality

What makes these assignments transformative is their emphasis on storytelling. Each Quick Write becomes a moment for students to place themselves at the centre of their learning. One student told me after class, "Professor, I've never had a class that was so much about me before." This sentiment captures the essence of the Quick Writes: connecting with the material on a deeply personal level.

For example, when discussing globalisation and multiculturalism, students often share stories about how these forces have shaped their communities. One student from Eastern Europe described how globalisation had introduced new opportunities to their hometown while eroding local traditions that they deemed invaluable. Another, from South Asia, reflected on the tension between preserving cultural identity and embracing global trends.

Over the semester, these assignments encourage students to reflect not only on their own lives but also on the systems and structures that shape them. They begin to recognise their own biases and positionalities, understanding how their perspectives are influenced by their cultural and social backgrounds. This aligns with the broader goals of anthropology and cultural studies, fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness.

The diversity of my classroom makes these assignments particularly powerful. With students from a wide range of cultural and national backgrounds, the Quick Writes become a shared journey of discovery. By sharing their stories, students learn from one another, gaining a deeper appreciation for the richness of human experience. This storytelling process also helps to disrupt epistemic hierarchies, validating diverse ways of knowing and challenging the dominance of Western academic frameworks. They also extend reflexive pedagogy by making positionality a repeated practice rather than a one-time classroom discussion. Through this process, knowledge is co-constructed, as students reinterpret theoretical concepts through their own narratives while engaging with the perspectives of others.

Ultimately, the Quick Writes are more than just assignments—they are a pedagogical bridge, linking theory to practice, the academic to the personal. Through storytelling, students engage with the material in ways that are both reflective and transformative, developing a deeper understanding of themselves, their peers, and the complex cultural dynamics of the world.

Intercultural Confrontations

In the classroom, the most transformative moments often arise when students are confronted with perspectives that challenge their preconceived cultural notions. One activity that has consistently brought such moments in my anthropology classes is an exercise where students analyse culturally constructed meanings of gender, status, and roles (Kennedy, 2018, 41). The task involves using a "sex-role inventory" trait list and associating specific traits with categories such as "femininity", "masculinity", "wealth", "poverty", "President", "teacher", "mother", "father", "minister", and "athlete". Students compare their results with their peers and reflect on the similarities and differences in their associations.

This activity often yields fascinating and, at times, deeply contentious insights. One semester, a male student from a conservative Eastern European country shared his associations for femininity as: “moody, emotional, and tender”—and masculinity— “rational and analytical.” As he explained, these traits were reflective of common cultural perceptions in his country, where women were thought to “think with their hearts” and men “with their minds.” His tone was not combative but honest, based on what he believed.

During the male student’s explanation, a female student from Western Europe, visibly upset, suddenly left the classroom without saying a word. After class, she approached me to apologise, explaining that she found the comments offensive, as they perpetuated traditional conservative views that subordinated women. She felt that remaining in the room would have made it impossible for her to engage constructively, as she felt like directly confronting the male student. This moment, while tense, encapsulated exactly what the activity was designed to achieve: a confrontation with deeply held cultural assumptions and the challenge of engaging with views that may be starkly different from one’s own. This moment also reveals the limits of intercultural dialogue. Discomfort can be pedagogically productive, but it is not automatically transformative. Without careful facilitation, such moments can reproduce harm or silence students who experience particular views as threatening rather than merely unfamiliar.

This moment highlights both the potential and the limits of reflexive pedagogy. While the activity is designed to surface cultural assumptions, it also demonstrates that such encounters can produce emotional discomfort that is not equally experienced by all students. In this sense, discomfort is not inherently productive, but must be carefully mediated within the classroom.

When we reconvened in the next week’s class, I facilitated a discussion to debrief the activity. Students shared their experiences and observations, reflecting on how their own cultural environments shaped their responses. Many noted how wildly divergent their lists had been, even for seemingly universal traits like “self-reliant” or “compassionate.” For some students, these traits were seen as gender-neutral, while others strongly associated them with either masculinity or femininity. The exercise underscored the idea that the same words can carry vastly different meanings depending on one’s cultural context. The debriefing process was therefore central to the reflexive work of the activity. It shifted the exercise from a confrontation between individual opinions toward an analysis of how gendered assumptions are socially produced, normalised, and contested across cultural contexts.

I explained to the students that the purpose of the activity was not to decide which interpretation was “correct.” Instead, it was to highlight the principles of cultural relativism and social construction; the understanding that knowledge and values are not universal but are shaped by local cultural environments. I reminded them that cultural intelligence, or the ability to navigate and understand these differences, is a skill that must be actively cultivated.

What struck me most was how the classroom became a microcosm of global diversity. For the Eastern European student, the exercise provided an opportunity to reflect on the cultural norms he had taken for granted. For the Western European student, it was a reminder of the challenges that come with engaging perspectives that feel deeply opposed to one’s own values. And for the rest of the class, it was a lesson in the importance of listening, even when understanding feels difficult.

By the end of the discussion, I emphasised that these difficult moments are not failures but vital opportunities for growth. Without such exchanges, we risk remaining in echo chambers, never challenging or broadening our worldviews. In anthropology, as in life, understanding someone else's perspective, even one we find troubling, requires seeing it within its cultural context. This does not mean we must accept or agree with it, but it does mean recognising it as a valid expression of a different lived experience.

The exercise remains one of the most memorable in my teaching career because it shows both the promise and the risk of reflexive pedagogy. It shows how discomfort can open space for learning, but only when it is framed in a certain way, revisited, and connected to broader questions about culture, power, and social construction. In this sense, it also shows how intercultural dialogue becomes more meaningful when it is situated within reflexive pedagogy, where students are pushed to examine where their beliefs come from and what they mean, rather than just expressing them.

Implications for Pedagogy

The insights gained from these classroom experiences extend beyond my own courses and the South Korean context. While the specific dynamics discussed here are shaped by internationalization in Korean higher education, the underlying challenges, such as navigating diverse epistemic assumptions, uneven participation, and differing expectations of learning, are common across internationalized and multicultural classrooms globally. From these reflections, several principles emerge for applying reflexive and constructivist pedagogy in internationalized classrooms:

Reflexivity is not a one-time exercise but a continuous process of examining biases, positionality, and assumptions. Educators must model this for their students, demonstrating how it enriches understanding and fosters critical engagement. My experience adapting the "Test Your Life Chances" activity showed the importance of reassessing teaching methods (in terms of having students challenge the questions, and their fit for our international context) to ensure they resonate with a diverse classroom.

Moments of tension, such as the gender trait discussion, reveal the potential of intercultural dialogue to challenge assumptions and provoke critical reflection. Facilitating these discussions with care ensures that all voices are heard while guiding students toward deeper understanding, showing the value of dialogic spaces in fostering intellectual diversity.

Centre Student Narratives as Knowledge. Assignments like Quick Writes or the privilege reflection demonstrate the transformative potential of centring students' experiences. These tasks encourage students to connect academic material to their own lives, giving them a sense of agency and self-awareness. Culturally responsive assignments empower students to see their lived experiences as valid epistemic contributions. Treat Knowledge as Socially Constructed. Activities like the media framing exercise underscore the importance of understanding knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. Here, local and global epistemologies are bridged, enabling students to critique dominant narratives while validating their own perspectives.

Conclusion

The internationalised classroom presents both challenges and opportunities, but these are not always easily separated. Bringing together students from different cultural backgrounds, with different assumptions about knowledge and learning, creates a space that is often uneven and, at times, difficult to navigate. What this paper has shown is not necessarily a solution to these challenges, but a way of working through them. Reflexive and constructivist pedagogy offers one way to approach this, particularly by making assumptions visible and allowing students to engage with knowledge through their own experiences.

At the same time, these approaches do not exist in isolation. Although this study is grounded in the South Korean context, the dynamics discussed here are not unique to it. Questions around participation, cultural expectations, and how knowledge is understood are present in many internationalized classrooms. In this sense, the examples in this paper point to broader issues within global higher education, even if they emerge in specific ways in different contexts. However, it is also important to recognise that pedagogy alone is not enough. Institutional structures continue to shape how classrooms operate, and without broader changes, there are limits to what can be done at the level of individual teaching practice.

Ultimately, what this paper suggests is that teaching in these contexts requires more than simply adapting content or incorporating diverse perspectives. It requires ongoing reflection, both from students and educators, on how knowledge is produced, shared, and understood. In some cases, this involves discomfort, and not all of these moments lead to clear outcomes. However, they do open up space for different kinds of engagement, where students are not only learning about cultural difference, but also thinking through their own position within it. This does not resolve the tensions present in internationalized classrooms, but it does make them more visible, and in doing so, creates the possibility for a different kind of learning.

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