

# Adventurers in Cultural Crossings: A Guide for and by International Teaching Assistants at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa



*Center for Teaching Excellence  
Office of Faculty Development and  
Academic Support  
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*Cover Photo: Paul Kandasamy (standing left) going over word associations with two of his students from his ELI 70: Listening Comprehension class.*



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From all of us who worked on this project, to all of those who may see themselves reflected in it, we hope you enjoy these reflections by "adventurers in cultural crossings!"

Kathleen O. Kane  
*Project Coordinator and Editor*

# I. Greetings!

## Carmen's Greeting

When I first entered a classroom at the University of Hawai'i (UH) as a Teaching Assistant (TA) a few years ago, I had no idea that I would also be entering the classroom as an *International* TA, not simply as a TA. When I requested a TAship from my department, they had given it to me without demur; but when I requested some training under an experienced teacher before I taught two introductory level courses myself, the department had decided that the training was



Carmen Wickramagamage

not necessary. They determined that 2 1/2 years of teaching experience in my native country were sufficient for the job at hand although they suggested that I observe several experienced teachers in class. The Department did not stress the importance of attending the TA orientation seminar held at the beginning of each semester by the Center for Teaching Excellence and for that reason I did not attend it.

As I undertook my first teaching assignment at UH, I was not unduly worried about my status as an International

TA. I was fluent in English, had some teaching experience and, as an advanced Ph.D. candidate, felt confident in my ability to teach the subject at the introductory level. Of course, I had some concerns as I prepared for my first semester at UH. I knew from my own experiences as a student at UH that the organization and presentation of teaching material and teacher-student interactions would be different than in Sri Lanka. I therefore took tips on these aspects from fellow teachers and considered myself adequately prepared. It was when I began teaching that I realized I was inadequately prepared for, and informed about, my role as an *international* teacher in a UH classroom. As I sought for common grounds between the students in my classes and myself, I explored ways to make the class material more meaningful to them and attempted to involve students as equal participants in the teaching and learning processes. Through trial and error, I realized that my being a foreigner could not be simply ignored, that it played a significant role in my difficulties as a novice teacher at UH.

In retrospect, I realize that in the students' eyes (and ears) I was "speaking with an accent," teaching standard mainstream texts, and had little knowledge of the local dimension to the students' lives that informed their attitudes and behaviors in UH classrooms. In other words, I was largely ignorant of what it meant to teach a mainly local student population at UH and no one had sought to enlighten me about that particular cultural dimension to teaching and learning. The differences I had observed and prepared for were national ones—that is, U.S. versus Indian—and not those that were *particular* to a place called Hawai'i, an institution called UH! I had little knowledge of

what students at UH wanted from their teachers in general and how they perceived their international teachers in particular. But as I experienced difficulties in my efforts to communicate with the students and saw my hours of preparation not always well received by the students, I began to see that I was not some unmarked teacher. Rather, in my students' eyes, I had a particular identity. I wish that I would have had some reminder of that before I had begun teaching.

For this reason, I am very glad to be a part of the team invited by the Center for Teaching Excellence to put together a guide for ITAs. I have valued the opportunity that the work on the guide has given me; to hear what students have to say about their interactions with ITAs and to see how various ITAs cope with their demanding roles as ITAs in UH classrooms. I hope this guide will introduce you, the new ITAs, to some of the issues involved in being an International Teaching Assistant in Hawai'i, and at UH in particular, and help ease your way through the complex cross-cultural encounter between student and ITA in the UH classroom. The insights and suggestions that are offered came through surveys and conversations with students and experienced ITAs at UH. They are offered as helpful tips, not as prescriptive formulae, to overcome those cultural barriers.

From the surveys we conducted of undergraduate students we learned that most students at UH display no inherent antipathy towards international instructors. How could they, one might ask, when Hawai'i itself is so "inter-national" in its constitution, where what might be deemed "foreign" or "strange" could be a neighborhood away! But students *are* students in Hawai'i, as any where else; that is, they look at and evaluate their encounters and experiences with international instructors from a student's point of view! Their concerns will be framed in this way: will my learning experience with this instructor be advantageous to me or not *as a student*?

So what makes an international instructor "good" according to the students? Ultimately, what appears to make him/her an effective teacher in the eyes of students is what makes *any* teacher effective: A willingness to communicate with the students, not simply "teach" them. Even the oft-cited difficulty with "accent" comes down to effective communication, because students often spoke appreciatively of teachers who found ways to work around it. Of course, an international instructor will have to work harder at communication because s/he cannot draw on a common cultural context to facilitate that process. But the students have some valuable suggestions on how to *create* an effective working environment in the classroom. This guide is intended to help you find your way as you begin your life as an International Teaching Assistant!

Carmen Wickramagama

## Masa's Greeting

Disclaimer: I asked the editor not to edit this first section below, on introducing myself. Therefore, it may contain some grammatical aberrations and awkwardness. But, in this particular case, they have a purpose: They represent my "accents" as a foreign student.

### Introducing Myself

I have been here for eight years but I feel I have come to Hawai'i only recently. This statement sounds absurd but it captures my reality most faithfully. It took me a long time to figure out that this place is "Hawai'i" with its unique history rather than the official 50th state



*Masahide Kato*

of "America." It was my students and friends from here who have brought me to the realization of an ongoing destruction of the native people's culture, identity, space and their very physical existence by the US-Japan military-tourist industrial complex. It was also through my students and friends that I have learned about the Hawaiian people's struggles to retain their nationhood, dignity, and justice. Hawai'i has taught me a sense of hope which constantly springs out from devastation like a phoenix.

The events surrounding the one hundred years since the overthrow of the autonomy of the Hawaiian people by the US has affected the consciousness of the International Teaching Assistants like myself. The essays I have written in this book reflect such a new generation of the ITAs who have come to be aware of "other" space than what is officially designated to us.



In the beginning there was an identity. It was called "International Teaching Assistants." The initial task which I assigned myself was, therefore, to find the commonality among those who are categorized by that identity. However, the identity of "ITA" started to lose its foundation as I began my interviews/dialogues with the actual TAs! There is so much diversity within the categories of both the "international" and the "teaching assistant." I have encountered TAs from China, Japan, Philippines, India and Canada, among other places. Their backgrounds are literally too diverse to put into a box labeled "international." Most definitely, we have different relationships with the dominant language of instruction, English, due to different historical experiences with the West. For example, East Asia has never had full exposure to the Western colonization like the rest of Asia which explains their relative unfamiliarity with English; for them Japan was the only colonizer. The category of "teaching assistant" became almost inoperative as we have totally different types of duty assigned by our respective departments. Some have only to consult graduate students during office hours. (Sounds better than the professor!) Some have to teach or meet with both undergraduates and graduates. Some TAs function actually as

instructors. And others are teaching assistants in the most conventional sense: they assist professors by taking charge of the review session, consultation hour, grading and keeping track of the attendance.

Yet I have found that all the ITAs I have interviewed have had one thing in common! Each are, and strive very hard to be, a good teacher.

### **Three Characteristics of International Teaching Assistants**

The first common denominator among ITAs who seem to enjoy teaching is that they are all good communicators. Although their familiarity with the means of communication (English) may vary, they seem to be good listeners and they express their opinions and feelings very frankly, honestly and openly. This trait naturally leads to their second common denominator: They seem to be very popular among the students. Quite a few times when I visited their offices, students either dropped by or called them up at the office. Some TAs mentioned receiving thank you notes or letters of gratitude at the end of the semester as the most memorable moment in their teaching career. Lastly, they all have a very positive attitude about life. They somehow know how to turn what can potentially become negative into something positive; the obstacles and difficulties in teaching are yet another challenge but never a problem for them.

Masahide Kato

## **The Most Memorable Moment in Your Teaching Career**

Ranjan Bhadouri, Mathematics

“One of my students, a junior majoring in Zoology, told me at the end of the course that she kept postponing taking this class because she was very scared of math. And that because of this class she actually enjoyed math and no longer is afraid of it. When I see my students try hard and no longer have any fear or hatred of math, I feel a sense of accomplishment.”

Antonina Espiritu, Economics

“Some students gave me thank you notes after the semester was over. One particular student even wrote to the department chair how much she appreciated my class. But what is important to me is not the confirmation of these letters. I am very happy to see the students who did not understand anything in the beginning start to act like a small economist by the end of the semester! I am very happy to see some students deciding to major in economics after taking my class. And to bring it to a level of the day to day classroom context, it is a fulfilling





*Antonina Espiritu teaching her economics class*

experience in itself to see the student's faces which were blank in the first place start to glow as they begin to understand the content. At those moments, I feel I was able to reach out to the students and to have them participate in the world of economics. After all, teaching is two way: To teach is really to learn something. The students are there to get something from me. And I learn from their feedback: 'to teach is to learn twice'."

### Javier Mendez, Zoology

"Well, I am talking to the students, right? And I can see they are not understanding what I am saying. So I try to explain. I change the way I explain. But somehow it does not seem to 'hit' them. So I try and try until something 'hits' them. Then all of a sudden the eyes of the students get wide open with an exclamation, "wow!" At that moment I get such a great feeling. So great that I don't need to get paid for doing this! Well, that's a lie of course. But, feeling wise, it is really great to see the students understanding something. The second greatest moment is when I see students from the past. They come to me and talk to me and we have a great conversation. At that moment I feel I must be doing something right. One more memory: It was back in 1991. The students in the class did poorly on the last quiz. The average was 6.5 out of ten. But a lot of the students wrote messages on the back of the quiz that they really appreciated the class and that they learned a lot in this class. You know, most people take time to complain or protest when they have a hard time in the quiz. But they took time to appreciate what they learned in the class. It was great. I still keep those quizzes."

## A Greeting from the Director of The International Student Office

Teaching is always a challenge; teaching cross-culturally is an even greater challenge! As International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) you will be cross-cultural teachers imparting much more than knowledge in your specific academic discipline. Because the University is diverse, teachers and students are exposed to a larger world; a real world where people of different backgrounds, expectations, beliefs, and values come together to learn from one another. You may be surprised



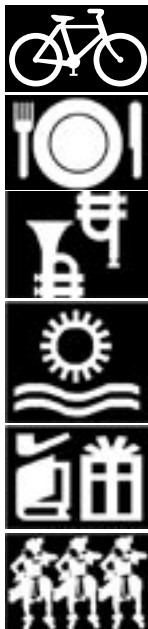
*June C. Naughton*

that the boundaries between students and teachers are different in the U.S. than in your country. American students are encouraged to speak their minds openly, question points of view, and seek clarification when necessary. This approach may feel uncomfortable or even disrespectful to you until both teachers and students learn to trust each other.

Adjusting to the learning styles of students in the American classroom will be a challenge. Not all students in the United States are motivated to learn in the same way as students from countries where education is more competitive. American students expect their teachers to stimulate them, to excite them about the subject matter, to give them knowledge that they do not have and to prepare them professionally for the world beyond the University. These expectations demand that ITAs learn new teaching strategies. The use of technology to enhance learning is taken for granted in the U.S., and ITAs may be unfamiliar with much of the available media and new technology. The struggle to present material in creative and effective ways with new teaching tools may be difficult but it is also very rewarding. You will want to be open to using the resources available on this campus to enhance your classes.

Many ITAs initially experience some difficulty communicating with students in Hawai'i because of "the accent". There is a unique language pattern here in Hawai'i that even standard English speakers from the continental U.S. never quite master. The world is filled with people who speak English with accents and this exposure to the world's English speakers will help prepare both you and your students for the world beyond the University. ITAs expose UH students to worlds well beyond the borders of the state of Hawai'i. I believe the best quality of your classroom will be to nurture the respect and tolerance that teachers and students can have for one another.

June C. Naughton, *Director,*  
International Student Office (ISO)



## **All Aboard! Masa's Tour to Local Culture and ITA Relaxation & Acculturation is about to embark!**

All the excellent ITAs that I have met through this project have one thing in common: they are all approachable. However, approachability is not entirely a question of our innate personality. It has to do with how much effort we actually make in order to relate to the students in our class. According to the survey for this guide, most students from Hawai'i want us to understand and appreciate the local culture. Throughout the Guide, we will interject some tips so that you can introduce yourself to the many cultures here in Hawai'i. The first step is for you to get to know the culture of local youths; that is the culture of your students. By trying what they do in their daily lives and by interacting with the people they "hang out" or grew up with, you may begin to feel totally at ease with the students in your class.

One fine day during my lunch break, I had a chance to visit my department office and had a fun interview with students assistants: John Shim, Tina Okamoto, Kristie Uyeda and Liza Cawagas who are "experts" in the culture of local youths. Our secretaries, Carole Moon and Evelyn Ho, also contributed to the interview since they've never really left the youth culture! Here are some tips that they gave us for our transformation of ITAs into totally approachable ITAs. The crucial point here is to "mingle with people." We listed things that are mostly enjoyable so that you will have some good excuses to get out of your office or room. If your officemates/roommates asks you where you are going, just tell them: I'm taking Masa's Tour to Local Culture and ITA Relaxation & Acculturation!!!

I can guarantee that the atmosphere of your class will radically change if you try just one of the tips in this tour!

Good luck and have fun!



## **First Stop: Food and Eating**

Let's begin with something universal among us. Food and Eating.



### **Quintessential Local Cuisine:**

Plate Lunch

Shoyu Chicken, BBQ Chicken, Beef Stew, Chicken Katsu, BBQ Beef, usually with two scoops of rice, macaroni salad, and thinly sliced cabbage or kim chee.

Manapua

Chinese Bao. The name was derived from a Hawaiian word, "*mea 'ono pua'a*," literally, pork dessert. When I used this word in Chinatown in Manila, there was a temporary communication between the vendor and myself.

Spam Musubi

Broiled Spam placed on top of a "rice cube."

Zippy's chili

With rice and onions Zippy's chili is a local favorite. Also Zippy's is a good place to go around midnight on Friday night or Saturday night because you can see and experience the real youth culture scene there!

### **Quintessential Hawaiian Cuisine:**

Poi

The Hawaiian staff of life. Made from pounded taro thinned with water. Once you get used to it, you will have a strange craving for poi periodically.

Laulau

Pork and fish wrapped in ti leaves and steamed.

Lomilomi Salmon

Salmon cut into pieces and marinated with tomato.

Poki

Raw fish marinated with shoyu or sesame oil with ogo (sea weed).

### **Where to go:**

Local cuisine:

Grace's, Diner's, Manapua Factory, Zippy's, or Makai Market at Ala Moana Shopping Center (for beginners), Maunakea Market in Chinatown (for intermediate level), and Masu's, or any lunch wagon (for the serious plate lunch eater).

Hawaiian Food:

Ono on Kapahulu Ave. Simply the Best.

## II. Viewpoints: Students

### Learning and Passing It On: Pedagogy in Hawaiian Culture.

The following essay is based on an interview with Kumu (teacher) Makalapua Ka'awa, an instructor for the Hawaiian Language Department at the University of Hawai'i. The basic issues addressed at the interview are: 1) pedagogy in Hawaiian tradition, 2) tasks involved as an educator of Hawaiian culture, and 3) practical advice in classroom strategy. This essay will give us a very good context to view our students expectations and orientations which are deeply rooted in the Hawaiian culture and tradition.

Makalapua  
Ka'awa:  
Instructor,  
Hawaiian  
Language  
Programs

#### I. A'o mai A'o aku (Learning and Passing it on)

In traditional Hawaiian society, knowledge was embedded in its oral culture. Therefore, it was crucial that all knowledge be transmitted from one generation to the next. A very high esteem was thus placed



Makalapua Ka'awa

on those who have acquired a high level of knowledge in a given field. They were called *kahuna*, as well as *kūpuna* (elders) within each family, to pass on the knowledge and nurture (*mālama*) the next generation so that what was known from the *ke au kahiko* (ancient times) was preserved and the next generation would be built upon that foundation. The responsibility to pass on knowledge was so ingrained in the society as a whole that the transmission of knowledge was guaranteed. Accordingly, the younger generation too was expected to take responsibility to learn. Certain individuals were chosen to be receptacles of the more important knowledge such as literature, genealogy, and history. The selection of those individuals was situated in the philosophy of nurturing the excellence within society. As a traditional saying goes, *Kūlia i ka nu'u* (to strive for the highest/peak), we encourage each generation and individual to attain the best that they can achieve, in whatever field they are apt to pursue. Whether it be academic, fishing, farming, or whatever career, if you do it to the best of your ability, you are fulfilling the expectation as a Hawaiian.

This process of transmitting knowledge is lucidly explained by Hawaiian words, *a'o mai* and *a'o aku* (*a'o* is a verb, *mai* and *aku* are particles signifying directions: *aku* meaning away from the subject and *mai* meaning towards the subject). They show a reciprocal nature of knowing process: once you have learned *a'o mai*, it is your responsibility to pass on *a'o aku* the knowledge you have gained to your friends, peers, children, and the next generation. Within the family structure, the principle group in our traditional society, transmission of knowledge was like an "adhesive" between different generations. The channel between *kūpuna* (elders) and *mo'opuna*

(grandchildren) is indeed very important. *Kūpuna* take responsibility to share what they know with *mo'opuna*, and in turn the *mo'opuna* are properly nurtured. So when *mo'opuna* are raised, not only the broad knowledge base but also the general values are imparted from *kūpuna* to *mo'opuna*. Moreover, *kua'ana* (older siblings) took responsibility to *mālama* those below them. Through examples and direct instructions, *kua'ana* showed the younger generations what is expected of them and what they need to learn to survive.

In general, knowing in traditional society was a living part of the society. Genealogies and history are kept alive through *oli* (chant), *hula* (dance) and *mele* (music) as well as through a number of other creative and artistic means. The artistic means were the media where inner qualities of both individuals and the community as a whole were expressed.

### **Na'auao (Enlightened intestines/mind/heart)**

As our culture is rooted in the oral tradition, everything we know must be internalized within ourselves. We consider *na'au* (intestines/mind/heart) as the place where knowledge and feelings are stored. Therefore, the term *na'auao* (enlightened mind) is used to signify an educated and wise person. Becoming *na'auao* has been our goal for many generations. This notion of *na'auao* makes a stark contrast with the way in which an educated person is conceived of in the Western educational system. An educated person in Hawaiian culture is not the one who thinks and talks from the top of his/her head, rather s/he can speak from within, or from, the internalized knowledge base. If one has to refer solely to books or sources outside of themselves, s/he would not be considered to be *na'auao* because the knowledge is not part of him/her. The stage of being *na'auao* is where the knowledge becomes a living part of the person.

### **Mālama (to nurture)**

The notion of *mālama* which I introduced in the first section is a broad concept which shows a fundamental relationship between our lives and our environment. It shows the whole concept of life, and guides us as to how we should live and how we should relate to our surroundings<sup>1</sup>. From the traditional cosmological point of view, we are the *mo'opuna* of *akua* (Goddesses and Gods) who are the earth mother and the sky father. We regard food as our *kūpuna* and, for that matter, everything that has life because they are here before us. We are here only to take care of them in a reciprocal manner. Thus if we *mālama* those around us and *'āina* (land) which are our *kūpuna*, we will be nurtured by them. *Mālama 'āina* is a traditional concept and yet is something to be practiced on a day to day basis. In the contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: George Helm, (a legendary Hawaiian musician/activist who disappeared in the sea of Kaho'olawe while he was protesting against the bombing of Kaho'olawe) reinforces her point:

"The truth is, there is man and there is environment. One does not supersede the other. The breath in man is the breath that maintains his life and nourishes his soul. Therefore, *'āina* is sacred. The church of life is not a building, it is the open sky, surrounding ocean, the beautiful soil. My duty is to protect Mother Earth, who gives me life. And to give thanks with humility as well as ask forgiveness for the arrogance and insensitivity of man." (*Ho'ihō'i Hou: A Tribute to George Helm & Kimo Mitchell*, 1984. Bamboo Ridge Press: Honolulu)

society like ours where Western values are predominant, resources are often considered as usable commodities and objects to be depleted. With 6 million tourists visiting every year, our resources, our *kūpuna*, are being taken away without any notion of *mālama* going back to replenish our *‘āina*. Similarly in the context of interpersonal relationships, *mālama* is the key. Without *kūpuna* and *mo’opuna*, *kumu* and *kua’ana* taking their roles to heart, the whole system is likely to fall apart and our cultural and social foundation not as strong as it meant to be.

### **Pono (balance of all the elements of life)**

Due to over one hundred years of suppression, our whole family system and thus our indigenous educational system is no longer assuming the responsibilities it once had. Consequently, there has been a crisis situation in terms of our self-esteem and self-identity. It is tragic that our life style is not *pono*. We are now at the point of re-learning, reclaiming and re-identifying who we are. Hopefully we will be able to look at our traditions and apply them to our contemporary situation. However, to strengthen ourselves and become *pono* as a people will take generations of conscious effort. What we need to do is to rebuild our cultural and social foundation. My role as an educator is to reaffirm the notion of *na’auao* so that learners will be genuinely “educated” not just within an institution but in many aspects of life. We believe our language is the foundation of our culture and restoration of this foundation will enable us to view our identity, traditional works, and culture as a whole through our own eyes. Currently, we have a great amount of diversity in ethnicity and culture here in Hawai’i. In order for us to benefit from each other, we should help each other to maintain the cultural and ethnic identity of each group so that nobody has to forsake identity to become educated. As educators in Hawai’i, we need to go beyond just being sensitive to different ethnic and cultural groups; we need to actively nurture the growth of their identities.

## **II. In the Classroom Context**

Let me now translate what we have discussed so far into classroom situations. As I mentioned in the last section, acknowledgment and active incorporation of the cultural diversity here is a very crucial component in lesson planning and implementation in the classroom. We should remind ourselves when we incorporate appropriate strategies and methodologies that we are here to help individuals to build their knowledge upon their own experiences and cultural identities. That means we need to be creative in dealing with different expectations that students bring with them.

### **Aia ka ‘ike i ka hana (knowledge lies in doing)**

#### **Group Work**

Working in small groups provides a non-threatening space where the exchange of information and collaboration among students can take place without feelings of intimidation. Such an exchange of information will provide each student opportunities to validate each other’s different expectations, perspectives and interpretations, which ultimately validates each student’s experience and background. Furthermore, gaining knowledge through activities, as our old saying

goes (*Aia ka 'ike i ka hana*) will provide opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in the semi-real life situation. Students can take the next step and contribute knowledge and skills to the society based on what they have gained in the classroom.

### **Card Communication**

Open lines of communication between teachers and students are crucial to making students want to be involved in the communication in and out of the class. It is very important for us to provide different modes of communication so that even if students are not comfortable to speak up in the class, there are other avenues available for them to express themselves. We use index cards on a daily basis to keep that avenue open. Journal writing can be another way to maintain such an avenue. Superficially, card writing in our program is to help improve the writing skills; the primary objective is actually to provide opportunities to develop basic communication skills. The content of cards is oftentimes non-academic, such as the student's feelings and experiences outside school. For Hawaiian language teachers, an open channel of communication has a broader implication: as we rebuild our nation as a Hawaiian speaking nation, we want Hawai'i's people to possess communication skills to freely exchange their ideas. Open lines of communication will also enable those teachers who are not from here to learn about our indigenous culture and other groups from the students so that they can have a broader basis with which to see the world and humanity.

### **III. Afterwords**

Ho'okahi wale nō lā o ka malihini a lilo 'oe i hoa kama'āina.

You are a visitor only the first day, from the second day you become a *kama'āina*, a children of the place

When you stay at someone's house, you can only depend on their hospitality for the first day. From the second day on, you need to take some responsibility for helping the host. As *poe 'oiwi* (people of the land) we welcome you, but it is expected for each to participate in society in a positive manner. We want you to be able to relate yourself to the community and make yourself feel at home. If in your work and play, you contribute to our society, you are contributing to *pono*, which in turn enables you to relate better to the community while you are here.





## **Second Stop: The Beach**

After you fill up your stomach, you need to relax and settle what is inside of you. The best place to do that is at the beach.

BEACHES:

Ala Moana Beach (for swimming, tanning, and picnicking) Diamond Head “Suicide,” “Lighthouse,” Sandy Beach, and Waimanalo.

\*John warns us not to wear socks when we wear slippers and also discourages men from wearing speedos (tight swim trunks for professional swimmers). See the section on “shopping” for appropriate swim wear.

**Most students find their International teachers to be an enriching asset to their learning experience**

## **Student’s Welcome to ITAs!**

“The diversity of experiences and opinions that foreign instructors bring to a classroom is the most important asset they have. To be able to give first-hand accounts of places and things is better than any text.”

(Sophomore—Undeclared)

“Foreign instructors can show us their different cultures and values and compare them to those of American society. I think it is an advantage to have a foreign instructor.”

(Sociology—Senior)

Many international teaching assistants might be relieved to know that most students at the University of Hawai’i (UH) have no inherent aversion to learning from foreign instructors. Indeed the appreciative comments on international instructors cited above are an indication that many students positively welcome such a change from “straight WASP [White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant] teaching,” as a Senior in Journalism put it. But why? It might be that in Hawai’i, with its mix of diverse immigrant cultures and booming tourist industry, the foreigner is not as foreign as in some other less touristic, more ethnically homogeneous places. It could also be that in the eyes of predominantly “minority” student populations at UH those U.S. teachers who convey “straight WASP teaching”—i.e., those who uncritically use teaching materials and techniques of the dominant or mainstream American culture—appear as foreign as those who are designated as foreign because they are from other countries. Whatever the reason the invariable complaint from students about hard-to-understand accents does not translate into a desire to avoid contact with international instructors *per se* in UH classrooms. Rather, most students appear to find these instructors as an enriching asset to their learning experience.

There are some classroom situations in which students *prefer* international teachers to U.S. teachers for fairly obvious reasons: in “language and culture classes,” as one student put it. In foreign language classes, students believe a native speaker will be an asset

because s/he can teach them the authentic enunciation, the subtle linguistic nuances and the idiomatic expressions of that language better than a non-native speaker; moreover, the native instructor can impart to them something of the cultural ethos—customs, beliefs, behaviors—that surrounds and informs the language. Students prefer foreign teachers in Area Studies courses, where the history and culture of a particular country are being studied; they seem to think that someone native to the country being studied can introduce them to aspects and details of the country's history and culture that might escape the outsider. Thus the foreign instructor is valorized over U.S. teachers in the above two situations because s/he is taken as the "authentic" representative of his/her country and language who can impart a superior knowledge of the subject under study. A student in Pacific Islands Studies explains it this way: "If the instructor is native to the country being studied—language, culture, and so forth—students receive insights into that nation, more than texts could convey."

But it is not only in the "language and culture classes" that the students valued the contributions of the international instructors. Students also spoke approvingly of teachers from other disciplines, who don't attempt to conceal or ignore their cultural differences and use those differences productively in their teaching. A graduate student in Secondary English spoke appreciatively of how "varied cultural perspectives" entered into and enlivened the subjects that she took with "foreign instructors." The subjects she named include Chemistry—where we don't commonly consider cultural perspectives—as well as American Studies and Anthropology. When it comes to knowledge, students do not want standard mainstream American fare to be conveyed to them by *all* teachers irrespective of their cultural/ethnic background. They suggest instead that *difference*—whether national, ethnic or cultural—has a place in UH classrooms. As a Freshman in Liberal Arts saw it: "Foreign instructors bring different perspectives on the subject matter into their lectures. They also bring in a taste of new culture into the classroom which gives us a fresh way of looking at the course materials presented and the teacher's own view-point." Another student believes that "teachers from foreign countries bring in new styles of teaching and new perspectives on subjects" (Sophomore—Undeclared). And this comparative view of things, which enables students to "better understand the world in which we live," according to another student, is the "key to an exceptional education" (Senior—Sociology).

The question is this: how do cultural differences can play a *useful* role in UH classrooms? It might be hard to imagine how different cultural perspectives might enter into and enrich the presentation of course materials in the Sciences—in Chemistry, for example. After all, if the theories and formulae of Chemistry that the ITA will be teaching the undergraduates are "givens" and the laboratory experiments determined in advance, there appears to be little or no room for variations influenced by cultural perspectives. But perhaps it is in the examples that the ITA uses to explain difficult concepts, and in the very methods we deploy in order to present the course materials that cultural differences can enter the science classrooms. The ITA in the Sciences could bring the personal element into the classroom by telling students something of how science is taught in his/her country and

why it is done that way and encourage students to share something of their educational backgrounds in return. This will bring that foreignness out into the open and even improve communication and contact between the ITA and the students. These are just suggestions; the ITA will surely find his/her own ways to make the class or lab less impersonal, depending on personal preference and experience. But the ITA can rest assured that such efforts to present course materials from one's own cultural perspective will not be resented by the students if it is done right and *contributes* to their learning. So a Senior in Nutrition asks international instructors to offer "many examples from their home country" because "this really helps broaden the educational experience we get here at UH."

The students' desire for a culturally diverse learning experience seems to have something to do with a certain gap in their knowledge that the U.S. educational system appears to foster: a poor understanding of the world they live in. Time and time again students praised their international instructors for imparting to them, as a Graduate Student in Botany put it, "A wider perspective than what I grew up with—a look into a place I might never visit and the opportunity to learn that our values are basically the same although our methods are diverse." National surveys in the U.S. demonstrate that U.S. students' knowledge of geography and understanding of their place in a world full of other nationals is quite poor. One possible reason could be the size of the United States itself with its geographical and cultural diversity which leaves students with little time to learn about other countries. Another reason might be that the United States' global importance as the last "Super Power" encourages a certain disdain when it comes to knowledge about the rest of the world; the others, this attitude seems to say, need to know about us, but we don't need to know about them. Whatever the reason, some UH students perceive this gap in knowledge as a "weakness" in their educational system (Junior—Sociology). Foreign instructors can help remedy this situation to some extent because as members of other cultures and nationalities they are able, as a Sophomore in Secondary Education explains it, "to 'open our eyes' to different perspectives so that we in turn can see things through different eyes."

Students offer different reasons for their desire for a culturally diverse learning experience. Some appreciate the expansion in cultural horizons that encounters with international instructors provide: "They opened my eyes to the world, made me see that America is not all that's out there, that other countries have different/better ways of thinking/doing." Others see these "different perspectives and experiences" of the international teachers as "lending new insights into the course material itself" (Junior—Botany). Some students see the dynamics of the classroom situation—the relationship of teacher and student—as itself altered *for the better* by the presence of the international teacher. A Senior in Journalism saw the teacher becoming their ally, no longer only their "teacher," in an American Studies class as they sought together to interpret and understand the bases of American culture and society: "I would say it made the course more interesting because the teacher from China was teaching 'American Studies' and rather than having a 'I know it all' attitude,

it was more like he was also learning along with us.” Obviously, humility and inquisitiveness on the part of the teacher proved to be effective teaching strategies. But some students are also not afraid of the more critical, because more distanced, perspectives on their own culture/society/politics that international instructors can offer. They are interested in how “outsiders perceive our country and culture” (Senior—Environmental Studies) and in the comparative view of cultures that an international instructor can impart. A Sophomore in Arts and Sciences explained her experience this way: “In an American Studies class, the instructor was from China and she gave the class different ways of looking at our culture as well as her own.” Clearly then, students not only want to know about our values but also how their values appear to us in light of our own. A Sophomore therefore suggests that foreign instructors “use their background to their advantage, not necessarily to try to conform to a U.S. or local standard. I encourage them to be different and pose different viewpoints, politically or culturally.”

Of course, critiques of American culture must be undertaken with care. Negative portrayals of one’s culture by outsiders is always suspect no matter what nationality one belongs to and U.S. students are no different. Their patriotic sense is easily aroused by what they perceive as simply negative or unfair appraisals. When that happens, comments such as the following can result: “In [the department], the ITA didn’t have any understanding of what it was like to grow up in the U.S. and just imposed opinions on us that she got out of a text book” (Senior—Classics). If the teachers do not recognize the difference in values between themselves and their students and the latter’s allegiance to U.S. culture, they can alienate the students. As a Senior in American Studies put it, the international teacher must recognize that “my point of view may not always agree with the instructor’s because what I believe to be legitimate American values may be totally foreign to the instructor.” The important thing is that teachers recognize students too have opinions and points of view; however mainstream, commonplace or reactionary we believe them to be, we must make room for them to be heard. If students feel welcome to air their opinions, there might be more opportunity for a change of mind on their part through dialogue and debate than if students feel shut out from the discussion in class. The students ask us to let them share their values as well as share our own with them by keeping an “open mind” (Senior—American Studies). In a country such as the United States where there is so much emphasis on the concept of “free speech,” this is no small request.

Carmen’s  
Strategies

*My strategy, when approaching controversial issues that I believe have some relevance to the students, has been to speak of those issues in relation to well-known court-cases or events in contemporary United States that focus on those particular issues. I have found, for instance, that when we discuss the representations of gender and racial discrimination or the issue of class in literary texts we have read, many students would be inclined initially to treat them as issues that are of no immediate concern to them. That is, they would regard them as issues that were of concern to Americans in the past or only of concern today to people elsewhere.*

*So, for instance, if we are discussing racial discrimination in an American novel set in the 1940s, students might regard it as a thing of the past; if the novel was about gender discrimination in contemporary India, the attitude might be one of pity and concern for those women out there in some other country. In other words, there is no desire on their part to make connections between these issues and their lives. In such situations, I would refer to contemporary events which highlight the continued presence of those issues in contemporary United States and in their lives. If gender discrimination generates little interest in class, I bring up the Bobbitt case, a woman who cut off her husband's penis after allegedly suffering years of spouse abuse. If I want to engage their interest in the issue of race, I bring up the Rodney King episode—the beating of a black motorist by police which was widely regarded as racist and which sparked riots in Los Angeles. If I want to engage them in both gender and race, I raise the case of Thomas-Hill, in which a black female law professor accused a black Supreme Court nominee of sexual harassment. If colonialism evokes little interest initially, I remind them of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and of the annexation of the islands by the U.S. government. If they insist United States is a classless society, I remind them of the popular TV show "Roseanne," which deals with working class family life. Through these strategies, I try to avoid the impression that my desire to engage the students in a critical appraisal of contemporary American society arises from anti-American sentiments, or that my opinions are simply those of an outsider who knows little about their culture. American students are heavily into TV culture, therefore I have found it easy to engage their interest in serious issues by referring to the portrayals of those issues on TV shows and other newsworthy events. When I do so, the students recognize the relevance of the issues to their lives, and recollect and share experiences from their own which indicate to me their genuine interest in the topics under discussion.*

Our "foreignness," which makes us outsiders to U.S. culture(s) in the students' eyes, can therefore be a potential advantage in our interactions with them, depending on the uses to which we put it. Sometimes it can be a disadvantage if we are either not conscious of our cultural differences from students or are only insufficiently aware of it. If we unilaterally enforce standards of behavior and ways of doing things from our own cultures in UH classrooms, with no consideration for students' wishes and differences in cultural norms, we are sure to alienate them. This was indeed the case with a teacher who stipulated "no caps in the class," which a student of that class justifiably declared "unreasonable" (Graduate Student—English as a Second Language). This student has the following advice for international instructors: "To consider the culture of the prospective students and the culture of the place where one is teaching." Students in the United States want to be participants in, as well as recipients of, learning; they wish to be treated as equals, not inferiors, of the teachers. "Strict disciplinarians," as one student called two of her international instructors, are therefore not welcome. Quite a few

students suggested that instructors be more “open to suggestions and constructive criticisms from students” (Senior—Classics). This might not be easy for those of us who come from cultures where the teacher-student relationship is more formal and hierarchical but it is necessary if the teacher desires to improve communications between him/herself and students. Students request that teachers respect their opinions and give them opportunities in class to air them; one student found her instructor too intent on completing her lesson plan for that day and not willing to take time off to answer students’ questions and hear their points of view (Sophomore—Social Work). This unwillingness of some international instructors to pause, answer questions, and clarify doubts was commented on by another local student: “They are very intense and I’m kind of laid back and the intense drive was a little too much” (Senior—Journalism). Students undoubtedly appreciate the hard work of their teachers but they also require some concessions made to differences in learning styles and classroom interactions which arise from cultural differences. “Just relax!” was a popular suggestion made by many students in response to our request for “helpful advice for incoming ITAs.”

Some students also complained about the presentation of course material at levels too advanced for them: “Sometimes they expect us to know things that are elementary to students from their country, but are difficult for us.” (Sophomore—Japanese). One way to avoid that is to gain some understanding of the students’ levels of comprehension at the beginning of the semester. For some female students especially, the difference in culture translated into behaviors and remarks on the part of their male teachers that they found chauvinistic or sexist. Such offensive behaviors are of course not unique to international instructors and sometimes the offense might be unintentional. The UH guidelines on sexual harassment might be one way to find out what constitutes unacceptable behavior; another might be to observe and learn from life what constitutes appropriate behavior in gender relations in U.S. society. There is, of course, no sure way to avoid all the cultural pit-falls that are attendant upon living in a foreign culture; but we can try to minimize the number of pit-falls that might impede communication between our students and ourselves. As a Sophomore in Biology/Economics explains, “because of the different backgrounds, there may be a barrier that is felt between the students and teacher. But it is essential to overcome this barrier in order to have a pleasant academic atmosphere.” We will, undoubtedly, do what we are most comfortable doing, but the important thing is not to remain too comfortable with who/what we are when we live and teach in a place/culture whose values and behavioral norms are unfamiliar.

C.W.

## An Essay By An ITA

Yuka Sato,  
*Graduate  
Teaching  
Assistant  
in German  
(European  
Languages  
and  
Literature)*



*Yuka Sato*

Teaching at the University of Hawai'i as an International Teaching Assistant has developed and improved my teaching style through teacher-student interaction. Since I started teaching in the Fall of 1992, my days have been filled with many trials and errors. In my first semester of teaching, something unexpected happened in the classroom almost every day. It was how my students reacted to me in every single class activity. I used to be overwhelmed by them, and put so much pressure on myself that I could not even smile at them. In the classroom, when I could not finish the lesson plan I spent hours preparing, I was frustrated with myself. It was the students' unpredictable responses that made me change my teaching plan. The cultural and educational difference between the students and myself made the preparation of my lessons a challenge for me. The students here show their respect for their instructor by asking for help, studying actively with the instructor and offering suggestions to make the class better. They do not just swallow what they are taught. So, unlike in Japan, I tried very hard to avoid one-way communication of instructor to students. When I realized that they want to study *with* me rather than just listening to instruction, I finally found I could enjoy teaching, talking to and working with them, with less pressure and greater satisfaction.

The most important point for me is the teacher-student relationship. Here at UH, a TA is not only a teacher, but also the person who shares questions, discussions and their own learning experiences. When the students find that their instructor is one they can work with, the relationship can motivate them to study and help each other. In my second semester of teaching, I could feel that my students were always with me. One of my unforgettable moments with my students was when we had a bomb threat for the second time. When it happened, we evacuated and went to the library, so I assumed that my students knew already where to go in an emergency. When I saw policemen around the building, it crossed my mind that my students might be standing at the library. And when I walked around the corner, I found them waiting! Ten out of fourteen were already there and suggested to me that we continue the lesson inside. We found a space to study around two Xerox machines behind the entrance. We sat down on the floor and studied there as if in the classroom. A few more students soon joined us. I was really impressed by their motivation and I had a strong feeling that we were sharing a class experience and enjoying it.

My teaching experiences here as an ITA are some of the most valuable moments in my life. Now I am very grateful for my students, and to the professors and colleagues in my department who gave me the chance of teaching students and widening my cultural

awareness. And above all I am grateful to my students and their heart warming understanding of me as an ITA. Thank You !

**How do we acquire a sense of place and knowledge of language, and incorporate them into our teaching practices?**

## **Teaching Under a Rainbow**

Students at UH do not want to be treated as all belonging to the generic category called “U.S.” students, as a group that can be characterized the same throughout the United States. Just as we ITAs have a history and a culture which influence our teaching (and learning) styles and behaviors in classroom situations, so do our students. They want us to recognize the fact that they live in a place called Hawai‘i that has a distinct culture, and that they have lives outside of the classroom, which influence how they learn in the classroom and what they consider good teaching. In answer to our request for helpful advice for incoming ITAs, one freshman student suggests: “To learn about Hawai‘i and not America because Hawai‘i is a unique state. You will be out of place if you come here prepared to teach mainland USA students. Learn about Hawai‘i, its people, culture and history and be open minded.” Another student in Education asks us to “become familiar with the language of Hawai‘i—not mainland English.” The language she is referring to is Pidgin or Hawaiian-Creole English which is spoken by many students both at home and/or among themselves. This is the primary language of many born and raised on these islands.

But *how* do we acquire this sense of place and knowledge of language, and incorporate them into our teaching materials and practices? Hawai‘i is a place of many ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs as a result of its history of plantation agriculture and immigration practices. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect us to acquire this knowledge of cultures and languages upon arriving; there is something called local culture—foods, music, attire, language, literature, arts, life-styles, attitudes, behaviors—that has emerged out of this mix of indigenous Hawaiian and immigrant and missionary cultures in Hawaii. If we wish to improve communications between ourselves and our students and be more comfortable in our interactions with them, we need to become aware in an on-going manner of what local means in Hawai‘i so our teaching becomes attuned to it. One student’s complaint sums it up: “At times, because ITAs are unfamiliar with our culture, they find it difficult to understand situations such as: What is an immigrant culture/life like? What does “Oriental” mean in Hawai‘i? What are the different values that create local culture?”

There is not only one way to become conversant with local culture(s). Each one of us will select a mode of acculturation that best suits our personality, and it will happen fast or slow depending on our adaptability to other cultures. But it must be done if we do not wish to teach ineffectively to a generic category called “American students” and if we want to adapt our teaching materials to local conditions.



I would like to share with you an episode from my own teaching experience which made me realize that, however effective I thought my teaching strategies and materials were, I had missed out on some special spark of interest and enthusiasm in my students until I decided to bring local literature and writing into the classroom.

*As graduate assistants in the Department of English we teach introductory literature courses at the sophomore level and this particular semester, my final one as a TA, I was assigned a course called Short Story and Novel, one I hadn't taught before. I was under a lot of pressure that semester. I had a lot of writing to do for my dissertation and I had to do it quickly if I wished to keep the deadline for graduation the next semester. As graduate assistants in our department, we are expected to select the texts we teach in our courses. A concerned faculty member advised me to reduce the workload for myself during this particularly intense period of time, by teaching texts with which I was familiar or had taught before. I followed the advice, and students seemed to enjoy most of the texts we read. We compared the different kinds of oppressions women face in different societies, confronted the painful reality of race in U.S. society, and looked closely at issues of class, family, and love in different cultures. We sometimes had heated discussions on those topics and the students wrote papers on what interested them most. But I had not included a single text that grounded those issues in local social and cultural contexts although students would often bring in experiences and observations from their daily lives as a means of relating to the issues highlighted in the texts we discussed.*

*The decision to exclude local writing had been a deliberate, perhaps even a cowardly, decision on my part. I wanted this one time to minimize the amount of time spent on preparing for class and the best way to do so was to teach texts I knew well. I had also not been exposed very much to local writing as a student and was therefore nervous about venturing into an area—local literature in its textual and cultural contexts—that I had not had much training in how to “read.” I was doubly nervous because I realized students might know how to read these texts better than I did and that I might no longer appear the competent teacher in the students' eyes if I had to say sometimes that I didn't know what something meant. But I changed my mind towards the end of the semester when students repeatedly made connections between the texts we read and their lives. I had by then developed comfortable relationships with the students and had come to realize that they wanted to contribute to, not simply receive learning. So I made a change in the reading list and included a story by a local writer and a colleague in the English Department, whose stories seemed to me to convey a sense of place. In class, I asked students to read aloud sections of the story so we could all hear the Pidgin we saw in print. I also asked the students to take charge of the discussion and share with me and each other what the story meant since it was about issues they were familiar with, if not confronted by, in their lives.*

*The class was transformed. They were curious about the author and wanted to locate the story in specific communities and places in Hawai'i; they placed the story's nostalgic recreation of an organic community against the on-going commercialization of Hawai'i and the disintegration of old ways of life. A few students told me that they had never seen Pidgin in print and didn't even know it could be written. I was touched. Heartened by that experiment, I brought copies of a speech from William Shakespeare's Hamlet written in three varieties of English — Standard English, Shakespearean English and Pidgin English — to class the next day. It was the last day of class, and three of us read the different versions in turn. The students laughed at the poor reproduction of the Shakespearean speech in Standard English and they laughed with the Pidgin user for making Shakespeare (or Hamlet) sound so local. Some students told me it would be the one handout that they will be sure to keep. For once I saw absolute delight in all of their faces at what we read, and felt it was a fitting climax to a semester-long effort by me to find common ground with students and to form a bond that expanded that of student and teacher. The students had somehow shared their sense of place with me and given me a glimpse of their lives. I felt I was no longer an alien in a class full of mostly local students whom I did not quite understand. But it had required a willingness on my part to blur that rigid boundary between teacher and student and to become a student in my turn."*

Of course, reading local literature is not necessarily the way to bring that sense of place into the classroom in other disciplines. But there are always other ways and other means. In the social sciences, it might be issues of interest to the local community at that moment whether it is trials, legislation, elections, land use, the Bishop Estate or Hawaiian sovereignty. This means we should try to keep up with local concerns through newspapers and broadcast news. In the sciences, it might mean taking as examples things that are familiar to students to illustrate or clarify difficult concepts and theories. Each discipline offers each ITA a challenge in this regard! The important thing is to let students know that we care to know about who they are and where they come from. The students will respect us for trying, if not always succeeding.

C.W.



### **Third Stop: MUSIC!**

While you are hanging loose at the beach, you can tune into some good music that fits the landscape:

**RADIO:**

Two genuinely local stations are KCCN (100.4 FM) and KINE (105.1 FM) these two stations play both traditional and contemporary music featuring local entertainers.

#### **Where you can listen to:**

Hawaiian Style Band

This band can teach you a lot about the Hawaiian people, their cultural values, and the true meaning of "aloha." (My most favorite band!)

Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau

The Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau display incredible harmony performing in a traditional yet contemporary style.

Cecilio & Kapono

This duo was very popular during my high school days back in Japan.

Genoa Keawe

Traditional. The operatic equivalent of Auntie Genoa Keawe would be Maria Callas. Auntie Genoa Keawe has such an amazing voice.

\*Reggae music is a crucial component of the local youth culture. If you are familiar with Bob Marley and the Wailers, Burning Spear, Black Uhuru, and Steel Pulse; you will fit right in with the local youth cultural scene. There is only one reggae show on this island. It is called Ninja Dread's Reggae Show on KTUH FM (90.3FM) every Saturday from 6pm to 9pm.

#### **Concerts:**

Makaha Bash (Usually May)

Makaha Bash is a celebration and gathering of local talent (i.e. different hawaiian bands and hula dancers) sharing the aloha spirit.

Kanikapila (Usually October)

Kanikapila is held at the Andrew Amphitheater is another event that showcases local talent including Frank De Lima, a master of ethnic comedy!

### III. Viewpoints: ITAs

#### The Johnny Appleseed Dilemma

Sridevi  
Menon  
*International  
Teaching  
Assistant in  
American  
Studies*

As a Teaching Assistant for the Department of American Studies, I shared my fellow TAs' concerns about pedagogical strategies as well as their frustrations in dealing with student diffidence and apathy. However, they had one advantage that I did not: they were American.

I am a woman of color. I speak English, I am told, with an accent. Although these *differences* can play a crucial role in the way any ITA is perceived, the problems relating to my identity were especially acute because I am a foreigner in the position of teaching American Studies to U.S. citizens. While American TAs could take for granted their readings of American culture, I could not. My grasp of the subject was considered suspect, and for most of the semester I was conscious of being "on probation". What I found most difficult to discuss in class were political issues or any critical reading of American society. Students were quick to perceive them as my opinions rather than alternate modes of understanding a particular experience. This very often generated a certain defensiveness or even hostility from students. Attempts to play the devil's advocate, to pose questions considered out-of-bounds, were often seen as efforts to force my point of view on them.

The challenge of teaching American Studies was to be able to gain students' trust in my authority as a teacher and for them to be able to put aside my foreignness to engage in an honest or frank critique of American culture. The latter was possible when I could introduce alternate readings without calling attention to myself; this was most successful when I was able to generate those views from amongst the students themselves. Or else, I had to validate these views by referring to particular critics or specific books (For instance: "According to Stuart Ewen..." or "*In Facing West ...*"). American students are sensitive to a sustained critique of American values, hence I felt compelled to alternate the critical readings with readings that were affirming, in an effort to encourage considered appraisals of the readings. For the most part, teaching American Studies made me self-conscious of being an outsider and forced me to be careful of what I said in class.

Interestingly, some students also appeared to be uncomfortable with my fluency in English. My ability to use "big, impressive words" appeared intimidating, and made students rather self-defensive (some thought it was a ploy to express my own ideological predilections!). That I could be articulate enough to question and pursue the opinions expressed by students in class was not perceived as a means of taking the discussion further or extending the argument. Instead, very often they resisted such efforts to engage in any form of polemical critique. My self-assurance and command of English meant to some of them that I was to controlling, which in turn made them uncomfortable.

Essentially, this experience made me defensive about my own role as a foreigner teaching American Studies. I realized that I didn't want to be labeled "anti-American" (which happened at least once!) not

because it went against my own convictions, but because it questioned my objectivity as a teacher. It made me suspect my own sense of fairness in respecting diverse opinions. I was concerned that my desire to push students into expending or building on their arguments was seen as act of intimidation rather than as an act to challenge students to think for themselves.

One anxiety that was constantly with me was that I would be asked something I didn't know. For example, I'd never heard of "Johnny Appleseed", and a student was quick to point out, "how can you teach American Studies when you don't know who he is?" It was a troubling question, one that raised a critical issue for me as an American Studies teacher. As a foreigner, my understanding of American culture had been primarily through texts. So, it meant that I had probably missed the nuances of American society that a person brought up here would know intimately. I wondered, how much did that undermine my own legitimacy as an American Studies teacher? I'd like to think that such gaps in my understanding of American culture did not take away from my ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the discipline. In some ways, being an outsider permitted me to perceive things that Americans would take for granted. It also pushed me to be more demanding of myself. Teaching has been a learning experience for me, sometimes a deeply satisfying one. Not only did students provide helpful insights, their comments often pushed me to research events or personalities that I would not have pursued if I had been merely a graduate student.

As a foreigner, I know I shall always have to engage in a self-conscious appraisal of my own shortcomings and limitations. But, the challenge will be to convince students that the perspectives I have to offer, more than my subjective opinions, are efforts to contribute to a mutually enriching learning experience.

**In our focus groups and interviews the crossing of culture and gender was a frequent topic of discussion**

## **Culture and Gender**

Let's consider the following scenarios:

Case One: A male student, tall, big-boned, an attention-seeker in class, smiles at and pats the petite female ITA familiarly on her shoulder a few times on his way out of the classroom. The ITA is so taken by surprise, she does not react in time. But she finds the gesture offensive and feels humiliated. In her own cultural context, she would have known how to react because she knows the code of conduct that governs teacher-student relations. In the U.S., her "paralysis" reflects her unfamiliarity of the acceptable code of conduct in U.S. classrooms. Is this acceptable behavior in teacher-student interactions in the U.S. classroom? In what way was her discomfort perhaps culture-conditioned? Was he being patronizing towards the foreign female TA? Was his gesture a precursor to another kind of sexual advance? What could have been an appropriate response in the situation, one that would have enabled her to signify her displeasure at his act in

no uncertain terms? Since the ITA did not react at the time of the incident, should she talk to him about it at the next class session so he will not take her silence as consent to similar gestures on his part in the future? Or should she behave as if nothing untoward had happened, hoping that it was a one-time occurrence which will not be repeated? The ITA is left with the feeling that her foreignness could be a positive disadvantage in certain classroom situations.

Case Two: A female student walks into the classroom wearing a skimpy top and very short shorts which leaves bare a part of her chest, her midriff and her upper thighs. She smiles at the male ITA and takes a front-row seat and is in the direct line of his vision. Others in the class appear to find nothing unusual about her attire because they do not look twice at her as he does. Coming from a culture where "respectable women" are more conservatively attired, and where women dressed as this student would be deemed not-so "respectable," he finds her outfit not only revealing but also somewhat indecent. In his own culture, he has never encountered a woman with much of her body revealed in everyday life, and certainly not in the classroom! To him, this attire is sexually suggestive; and therefore, he feels squeamish about looking at her. What his eyes register is a half-naked woman and his culturally-ingrained moral standards signal it is not right to look at what he perceives as semi-nudity. He is afraid the other students in the class would notice his embarrassment and decides to keep his gaze averted from that section of the class where she is seated. But this means that his eyes cannot scan the class with ease as he lectures, fields questions and discusses ideas, as he would do otherwise. It is a strain on him to keep his gaze averted and he knows that one part of the class is being excluded from full involvement in that day's activities because of his confused state of mind. He wonders: Is it his own conservative upbringing and different notions of femininity which make him see the female student's attire as suggestive? Or do her attire and demeanor really signal a sexual "come-on" ? Even if this was so, is it ethical for him as a teacher to entertain such thoughts as her teacher? Is he discriminating against a certain member, or certain members, of the class when he cannot, or would not, look at her in class because she is dressed in a fashion that he finds quite embarrassing, but which others clearly do not? The ITA knows that cultural differences, his difference from his students in the U.S. classroom, play some role in his confusion.

The two scenarios presented, one actual and the other constructed from discussions with ITAs, are similar to situations that the ITA could face in the UH classroom. These scenarios raise the issues of sexual harassment and gender (or gendered) discrimination. The newly arrived ITA might not know that the issue of sexual harassment has been gaining a lot of attention in the U.S. in recent years, or that UH has a Sexual Harassment Policy and Procedural Guidelines. But as new ITAs, and as foreigners in the U.S., we would be well advised to make ourselves familiar with the issue in general and the UH policy in particular so that we would be better apprised of what our rights and responsibilities are, and what our code of conduct should be as teachers and as students in the UH classroom. Of course, sexual harassment is certainly not an issue that concerns international

instructors alone. But cultural differences may render the ITA more vulnerable to either acts or charges of sexual harassment because we are less likely to be familiar with the acceptable code of conduct that governs gender relations in U.S. society and culture. Codes of conduct, after all, are not identical for all societies and cultures. Moreover, where cross-cultural communication is involved as with ITAs in UH classrooms, misinterpreted gestures, behaviors and speech could send a wrong message and create awkward or difficult situations. Our conversations with some experienced ITAs at UH, in fact, revealed problems that they have encountered, anxieties they harbor and opinions they hold with regard to the issue of sexual harassment. What follows are some thoughts on the issue and possible courses of action for new ITAs that suggested themselves in conversations among these ITAs. Let's take the two cases described above which these ITAs discussed.

### **Case One:**

Is the female ITA somehow responsible for what happened to her? If so, in what way? Our panel of ITAs was divided on the issue:

*ITA 1: But she's partly responsible, how she acts, how she dresses.*

*ITA 2: I disagree. Not at all responsible. It's her prerogative how she acts, what she wears. Nothing gives him the right to touch. Even partial responsibility. It's a miscommunication on his part, not hers.*

ITA 2 is, indeed, right. Such gestures or physical contact is not permissible in teacher-student relations in the United States and the ITA should not question herself or blame herself in any way for the student's decision to transgress this accepted standard of conduct. Certainly the ITA, as the teacher, should be decently attired and refrain from behaviors and gestures that are intentionally suggestive or provocative. The ITA was appropriately, conservatively dressed and had no intention of encouraging such a familiar approach from her students. The responsibility for his unacceptable behavior therefore lies with the student alone. Why did the student feel it was O.K. for him to violate the code? Was it because of her foreignness that he saw an opportunity to transgress normal codes, thinking that she would not know? Was the relative sizes of teacher and student a factor? She is small in size and he is large. Was it her friendly, open attitude towards her students which he took advantage of? We will never know the answers to these questions. What is important here is that all ITAs realize that such conduct is *not acceptable*.

What then could have been an appropriate course of action for the ITA in such a situation? The ITA could have called the student back and told him politely: "I am very uncomfortable with what you just did. Could you please refrain from such actions in the future?" The chances are that the student will apologize and behave himself with more restraint in the future although relations between that student and teacher might be strained for a while. Clearly, even if the student's gesture was not intentionally sexual, it was gendered and he was being patronizing. It is unlikely that the student would pat a male teacher on his shoulder however friendly they become in class! So gender does play a role in his action. It is therefore necessary to

let the student know that exception is taken to his behavior and that the ITA is not afraid to let him know. It could be that he is taking advantage of her foreignness. That is why it is imperative, given our international status, to enforce acceptable codes of conduct in teacher-student relations in the classroom. The ITA who is left speechless by such unusual conduct will need to take the next available opportunity to let the student know that such a gesture is unwelcome. If she does not, he is likely to take her silence as consent to further infringement of her rights as a teacher and as a woman.

Another common example of behavior by some male students towards female ITAs is to comment on the teachers' appearance in ways that suggest approval. Such comments, whether complementary or not, are again inappropriate and unacceptable in teacher-student relations. Such comments introduce gender difference and the power differential that attaches to being male and female in most societies into the classroom. When the male student comments on his teacher's physical appearance, not her teacherly achievements or skills, he is asserting his prerogative as a male to reduce the female teacher to the dimensions of her physical body, making the teacher-student relationship gendered. The ITA is therefore well within her rights to object to such comments. However friendly and open U.S. teachers are with their students it is important to remember is that the teacher-student relationship should be maintained on a professional footing, and any mode of conduct that interferes with that should be discouraged.

Of course, she may want to exercise her discretion and evaluate such incidents on a case-by-case basis. If a student's comment is a one-time occurrence, showing no disrespect and/or does not target her body, she may choose to ignore it. But if the student is persistent in his complements, seems desirous of transgressing the professional relationship of teacher and student, or focuses on her body in a disrespectful manner, the ITA is well-advised to tell him in no uncertain terms that his advances are unwelcome and should not be repeated. If the ITA is unsure of the student's intent and/or her course of action, she should consult an experienced TA, ITA or a trusted faculty member in her department, preferably a female who might be able to advise her what she could do. If the ITA is unsure what his/her rights are as a student, s/he should speak with a responsible and trustworthy member of one's own department and/or read the UH policy and guidelines on sexual harassment and discrimination to learn what is permissible behavior on the part of one's teacher as well as for fellow students.

It is not possible to completely forget gender and other cultural markers in human transactions—in the classroom and outside—but we must minimize interference from it in the teaching and learning processes in the classroom and discourage those who seize upon it to upset the delicate relationship of TA and student. This does not mean that the ITA should not be friendly with students, nor does it mean that s/he should always maintain distance from students. Students appreciate teachers who are friendly and it is friendliness rather than the authoritative role that will work for TAs who are closer in age to



their students. But that friendliness, whether on the part of the teacher or student, should not diminish professional aspects of the teacher-student relationship.

One ITA's experience with a persistent male student and her response are instructive: "I have had a male student pestering: 'Can I take you to lunch? You've done so much for me.' I said: 'That goes beyond the call of duty! Just now, I want you to pass that exam!'" Even if the student took her friendliness as an invitation to something more, the ITA indicates in her reply, politely but firmly, that there are limits to her friendliness with students. This same ITA also described the form her interactions with her students take: "In my case, I'm the initiator. What's wrong with being close to somebody? . . . I tap students, smile at them. So they know you too are a human being. Because then they see you as a human being with your own difficulties. But the code of conduct must be there." This mode of interaction undoubtedly enables her to establish a link, or common bond, with her students.

Nevertheless, ITAs should keep in mind that where physical contact is involved (in this case "tapping") they should proceed with caution. Just as we as ITAs are leery of taps on the shoulder by students, we should remember that many students will not welcome such gestures on the part of their teachers. A very fine line separates being friendly from being over familiar! Students have rights as well as teachers and they need not put up with any kind of behavior from their teachers that they find offensive. This is especially instructive for ITAs who are themselves students in other classrooms. As one ITA reminded us, "the TA can also be victimized, in their role as a student."

## **Case 2:**

The scenario described in Case Two, on the other hand, raises a slightly different set of issues: culture-generated perceptions and misconceptions about dress codes and behaviors. The male ITA "sees" an indecently clad woman and takes steps to avoid eye contact with what he regards as a spectacle that cannot be met with indifference. To some extent, such an attitude cannot be avoided; lessons about dress codes and standards of decency that one has imbibed from childhood cannot be purged in a semester or two. The ITA will continue to misread cues on behavioral norms for a while. What is important is that the ITA be aware that he might be misreading cultural cues and not be too quick to evaluate and judge behaviors in a foreign culture. The attire worn by the female student in Case Two is not uncommon among local and mainland youth and it is by no means a guide to morals or conduct in or outside the classroom. The relationship between dress code and conduct differs from one culture to another, and whether the ITA is male or female, it is important not to judge students according to different standards than those that exist here.

What then should be the course of action of the ITA who still finds such attire indecent or suggestive? Should he, as the ITA in the hypothetical scenario, remain distant from such students—that is, avoid eye-contact, be more formal—as a means of preempting any

acts or charges of improper behavior? Our panel of ITAs offered conflicting opinions on the subject:

*ITA 1: I would not be friendly with female students.*

*ITA 2: Don't you feel you're committing discrimination? I mean, you have a problem with women. If a guy asks for help, you have no misgivings. With a female student, you're hesitant.*

*ITA 1: Women are different with women, too. No one is gender-free in their treatment of others.*

*ITA 3: Someone told me that I am very friendly with men, and distant with women. Men become friends RIGHT AWAY! With women, it's just . . . "oh, hi!" from a distance. . . . It discriminates.*

*ITA 1: I err on the side of caution.*

ITA 1 obviously is quite nervous about what his eyes register when he looks at female students in certain kinds of attire and whether his behavior might somehow reflect those culture-conditioned perceptions. He opts to proceed with caution; to maintain a more formal relationship with the women in his class, rather than be accused of improper behavior. He would rather be safe than sorry later on. He has reason to adopt such an attitude. As he points out, "I'm a Muslim, and the stereotype of that precedes me. I'm likely to be penalized." Assumptions or stereotypes that are held against particular groups—in this case, about Muslims characterized as being lecherous—can precede actual behavior or performance and might lead to misinterpretations of his actions. In his case, he preempts false accusations that might result from such misconceptions by maintaining a more distant relationship with his female students. He prefers to be accused of being distant to that of being accused of a more serious charge of sexual harassment.

The point made by the other two ITAs who suggest that he might be discriminating against the female students in another way by acting so formally with them, indicates that he may be overly cautious. As ITA 3 says, if he won't look at a female student in class because he sees her as being improperly clad, he "is not treating her like a person . . . . How can you have interaction, how can you teach, without seeing the student?" If he deliberately averts his eyes from particular students, he is unwittingly excluding them from full involvement in classroom interactions; after all, if he is more formal and more distant with the female students than with the male students both in and out of class, he cannot be as much help to them. ITA 3 puts the role of the ITA in perspective: "The job we have is to excite students about learning and thinking. I 'see' pretty students. I can't deny that. But my job is to transmit joy of knowing. Not sexual harassment. We have to know that our job is teaching . . ."

Of course, teaching and communicating across diverse cultures is not easy. The ITA's first encounter to cross-gender interactions arises from his awareness of the pit-falls of cross-cultural communication and the misunderstandings that can arise, and his concerns cannot be dismissed easily. As another ITA points out, "the sexual harassment issue is harder for foreigners, not always knowing what constitutes non-threatening, non-harassing behavior." The UH policy on sexual harassment is one source of information; another is critical observation

of what goes on around one in the area of gender relations—in Hawai‘i in particular and in the U.S. in general.

What then could be an appropriate mode of behavior for the ITA who neither wants to “err on the side of caution”—that is, behave formally with members of the other gender—nor wants to be accused of improper conduct? First of all, the ITA should not make assumptions about student behaviors based on their dress codes. On-going inquiry and understanding about the culture should precede judgment. Secondly, the ITA should always keep in mind that his/her job is that of teacher and that it is their responsibility to adhere to a code of conduct that befits that role at all times in relation to students. The UH policy on sexual harassment does not encourage even consensual relationships with teacher and student because this violates the professional aspect to that relationship. If the ITA has trouble decoding a particular gesture, behavior or action on the part of students or teachers, it would be good to consult with U.S. colleagues before forming an opinion or acting upon it. A more distant relationship with students of the other gender might be an easy way out of the problems that beset cross-cultural and cross-gender interactions, but such an attitude also discriminates against members of that gender by excluding them in certain regards from the learning process. This may further discourage students who are hesitant about their presence and role in the class; for example, a female student in a traditionally male-dominated discipline such as Engineering or Architecture might interpret the teacher’s distant attitude towards her as signaling a perceived inadequacy on her part or that she is not welcome. *That* would be unfortunate and unfair. Certainly, the answer is not to touch students as a means of fostering communication and learning, and particularly so if such acts of demonstrative affection are alien to his/her upbringing. In cross-gender interactions, it may not even be acceptable. But we should remain friendly with both genders and not discriminate against one. We need not wait until the grades are in at the end of the semester to become friendly with students of the opposite gender. Friendliness enables learning and communication. But grading is a continual reminder to us of the power that the teacher always has over his/her students in the classroom. This underlies the reason why friendliness with students should be kept within appropriate and clear limits, to avoid the conflicts of interest that might arise from a romantic interest in a particular student, and the fear of reprisals that students might feel about spurning such an interest on the part of their teacher.

To some extent, ITA 1 is correct that “no one is gender free in their treatment of others.” But in the classroom, the primary relationship is that of teacher and students. In the classroom both men and women are our students and it is our responsibility to teach them. In this respect, the gender of the teacher and/or student is secondary. Where gendered behavior seeks to interfere with our teacherly vision, we must tell ourselves that it should not; further, we must act at all times with this in mind. Because if we let it interfere, we are violating the trust that students, male and female, place in us as their teachers. One ITA had the following advice: “When women and men are mixed,

there are codes of conduct that apply throughout life that apply here.” If we adhere to a code of conduct that is deemed to be decent, act professionally and respect students’ rights, we might safely navigate the complex waters of cross-cultural communication.

C.W.

## **Masa’s Tips for a Better Classroom: The Scientific Approach**

I interviewed International Teaching Assistants and collected some of their suggestions for new ITAs. Although these tips are given by ITAs for ITAs, they can also be helpful to anyone teaching here at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa. My discovery of such universality in these tips prompted me to venture into the reconstruction of the science of humane classroom interaction. But please don’t take the “science” part too seriously because neither I nor the editorial staff are “science people”! I am simply imitating scientific language in hopes that ITAs from the sciences will be able to enjoy this guide.

### **Universal Axiom I: Correlation between ‘fear’ and ‘unknown’**

‘Fear’ in general increases in proportion to the increment of the element of ‘unknown’ in your life.

**Theorem 1:**                    **Fear =  $f$  (Unknown)**

It also depends on what kind of environment in which ‘unknown’ is situated. If the familiar environmental index is large (as: family, friends, and any familiar space), ‘fear’ in turn decreases. However, if the familiar environmental index is small (as a: school or hospital), ‘fear’ increases.

**Theorem 2:**                    **Fear =  $f$  (Unknown)**  
**(Familiar Environment Index)**

\*This theorem has been proven in my Japanese youth cultural tradition through ghost stories in which very graphic expressions of ‘fear’ always revolve around schools or hospitals.

In the classroom, structurally speaking, both teachers and students are situated in the space where there is a strong tendency for the generation of ‘fear’.

Solution: In order to alleviate ‘fear’, the familiar environmental index must be boosted vigorously from the very first day of the class.

Hypothesis: When the familiar environmental index is boosted beyond a certain threshold, the link between ‘fear’ and ‘unknown’ gets severed and ‘unknown’ then enters into a new relationship with . . . ‘fun!’

“Yeah! But How?”

### 1.0: The Law of Self-Exposure.

The more you expose yourself, the more familiarity you generate in the class.

According to Vivek, who is from India and teaches History, we ITAs can make use of what is considered to be our own “exotic” qualities, in order to make students interested in the class. For instance, Vivek makes jokes about his “accent,” “unique phraseology,” and other cultural differences. The students then share their own experiences of cultural shock. Consequently, both ITAs and students are able to solve the equation: cultural differences + unknown = fear. Cultural differences can be a source of fun or at least an element which breaks the ice between ITAs and students.

I make it a rule to tell my students on the first day of instruction that I have a Japanese accent because I am Japanese from Japan! By simply stating the obvious, one of the major components of the ‘unknown’ is alleviated and my accent becomes a “given” and no longer an “unknown” element in the classroom. In some cases, accents can be a productive element rather than a negative element in the classroom. One of the students of Yongshen, a Mathematics teacher from China, expressed in her evaluation that her teacher’s accent actually helped her to understand math better than if she had an American teacher because she began to listen to the teacher more carefully! Therefore, cultural differences can promote better communicative channels between teachers and students contrary to the stereotypical understanding about the impact of cultural differences on communication.

#### 1.1: The Law of Personalization

The more you bring your personal and cultural experience in to the class, the more familiar the class space becomes.

Closely related to the law of self-exposure is the law of personalization. Quite a few students point out that the advantage of having an ITA is that they have a chance to learn about different cultures and see different point of views. As ITAs, sharing our personal experience thus serves a double purpose: it makes the classroom a more friendly and familiar environment, and it brings a positive element of cross-cultural understanding into the classroom.

But Watch Out! The law of personalization is tricky: beyond a certain threshold, the law then is subject to entropy.

#### 1.2: Counteractive Tendency to the Law of Personalization

If you bring too much of yourself into the classroom, it starts to generate boredom which in turn undermines the possible link between ‘familiarity’ and ‘fun’.

This counteractive tendency can be subsumed under the correlation between boredom and monologue.

#### 1.3: The Law of Too Much Talk

The more monologue (either by the teacher or by a few excessively outspoken individual students in the class), the more boredom is generated in the class.

### **Theorem 3: Boredom = f Monologue**

As you already know from your own experience, boredom is as damaging as ‘fear’ to the maintenance of healthy classroom interaction.

#### **2.0: The Law of Immediacy or Validation of Student’s Existence**

The more immediate initial links there are to the student’s own life and feelings, the more involvement you can expect from your students.

Ranjan, a Mathematics TA from Canada provides an insight:

Editor: How do you alleviate the fear of math in the students?

Ranjan: Well . . . I try to bring them back to the very basics and make the lecture exciting. If I see somebody at loss, I will slow down and try not to use any fancy vocabulary.

Nina, an Economics TA from the Philippines, always starts from the very basic understanding of economics which includes such topics as interest, savings, loans, and understanding of economy. Similarly, some TAs adopt image exercises to boost the student’s participation. For example, in the case of Political Science, I ask initial questions such as: “What is your image of power?”, or “What is your image of social control?” This image exercise can provide a non-threatening space for students to think and speak because everyone will have some prior idea of the concepts used in the class.

Katharina, a graduate assistant in Women’s Studies from Germany, emphasizes validating knowledge that students already have, upon which more sophisticated knowledge can be built. She recalls that her best teacher was able to develop a lecture based upon the prior knowledge of students, even though that knowledge might be limited in scope or in some cases based on pure misunderstanding.

By extension, the law of immediacy involves an active use of local materials.

#### **2.1: The Law of Locality**

The more the content is connected with the lives of the students, the more excited the students become.

Carmen mentions elsewhere in this guide how the use of local literature in her English course totally transformed the dynamics of the class in a positive direction. Vivek tells how he includes the issue of Hawaiian sovereignty to provide a hook up for local students. My own experience has proven the efficacy of local materials in motivating students and generating lively discussions in class. Most effective was the use of poems written in Pidgin or Hawaiian Creole English, which instantly changed the dynamics of the class; those who had been quiet became active participants.

Finally, if we combine the Law of Self-Exposure and the Law of Immediacy, we will reach a Universal Axiom as an alternative to the one posed in the beginning.

### **Universal Axiom II: Mutual Validation**

The law of self-exposure is actually about the validation of our own unique cultural and other backgrounds. If we can validate ourselves in the classroom by any means at hand, including making fun of ourselves, we can transform what appears to be ‘unknown’ into a source of positive, interactive communication. The Law of Immediacy

is a structural counterpart to the Law of Self-Exposure. It is the act of validating the background, experience and feelings of students. Again, what appears to be 'unknown' in the class is transformed into the cornerstone for a more interactive and productive learning process.

Now we have a scientifically proved Axiom alternative to the Universal Axiom I. Voila!

### **Universal Axiom II:**

Mutual Validation x ITAs x Students x Knowing = FUN!

M.K.

## **IV. Viewpoints: Crossings**

### **Three Adventurers in Cultural Crossing**

*Interviews with Ranjan Bhaduri (Mathematics Department, Canadian), Katharina Heyer (Political Science/Women Studies Department, German) and Javier Mendez (Zoology Department, Costa Rican).*

*During my random and guerrilla interviews with ITAs, three ITAs emerged as unusual figures. Their presence seems to blend perfectly in Hawai'i where cross cultural communication is a daily and vital necessity. I became more curious about their backgrounds than their teaching experiences. I found that all of them had actively sought cross cultural experiences prior to their arrival at Hawai'i and that they continue to search for a better understanding of other cultures as well as themselves. Their continuous challenge to open themselves up to other cultures presents an ideal role model for other ITAs.*

M.K.

### **Keeping Your Culture and Opening Yourself to Other Cultures.**

*For Ranjan Bhaduri, cross cultural communication has been identical with his life itself. He illustrates that cross cultural communication does not mean abandoning one's own culture. On the contrary, it is in our constant effort to reshape our culture that we widen the horizon of our understanding of other cultures.*



Ranjan Bhaduri

Editor: You gave me the impression that your life has been saturated with cross cultural exchanges from the time you were born.

Ranjan: I was born and raised in Canada. But my parents are Indian. They were both born and raised in India and they moved to Canada afterwards. When I was a baby they spoke to me in Bengali. I give my parents all the credit for my speaking ability. I learned English because I was in the English

speaking part of Canada. However, I visited India several times where a lot of my cousins, my grandmother and other relatives still live. I extended the length of my stay each time. The last time I was there, I stayed for eleven weeks. Even at home I grew up with Indian culture. I feel very Indian but I also feel very Canadian as well. I guess I want to know about both the East and the West. I have visited Japan and Indonesia, too. Although I am fluent in Bengali, I must confess that my writing and reading ability is that of an eight year old child. That is something I do want to improve. It is just a matter of sitting down and spending time. I still believe that I will become better in reading and writing because there are a lot of good books in Bengali literature. I want those books to be accessible to me.

### **The Art of Cross Cultural Communication**

*Before landing in Hawai'i, Katharina spent two years in Japan where she invented her own art of cross cultural communication. It was not, however, easy sailing in the beginning. She had to overcome the difficulty of being a German woman in a particularly exclusionary and patriarchal society.*

Editor: How were you able to relate to the people? What difficulties did you face?

Katharina: I worked for a Japanese company that published an English-language tourist magazine. I was the only woman *gaijin* (foreigner) in the company. In my relations to my colleagues I had to be careful to negotiate the expectations placed on me as an employee and as a woman: modesty and deference to my boss and my male colleagues, with the tokenism I was granted



*Katharina Heyer*

for being foreign. I was thus not expected to serve tea with the other women, but I could not question my bosses' decisions on my articles, even though I had a lot of editorial license. I was constantly playing several roles at the same time, using a different language for each role and each interaction.

Editor: How did you learn those different roles and languages?

Katharina: Mainly by observing and listening, I think. As you know, people in Japan won't tell you what to do and how to behave: either you know all the implicit social codes, or you don't. Especially Kyoto, where I lived, is known among the Japanese to be a very 'closed' society. So I became a master eavesdropper. My blue-eyed typical *gaijin* appearance served as the perfect mask to allow me to fade in the background when sitting on a bus or in a public bath; I wasn't expected to have a clue to what was going on. So while I was pointed to on the one hand, I was also ignored. Humor has been another great 'boundary breaker' for me. I'll never forget the first Japanese joke I cracked- it was such a victory! Once I was able to lose some of that self-consciousness and not worry about being too tall or standing out or having to give speeches in Japanese in front of a big party, I started to act more Japanese and thus, more naturally. This meant, at times, speaking in the higher-pitched more formal and



humble Japanese women's language, which came surprisingly (and perhaps frighteningly!) easy to me. It also meant learning how to show respect without having to humiliate myself. The lesson I had to learn was not to turn myself into a Japanese, but to learn how to play their game and to make it part of mine.

### **Understanding Hawai'i: Stepping Out of Our Narrow Confinement.**

*When I met Javier Mendez for the first time, I thought I came to the wrong office: he looked like a "local boy" to me. There is no mystery here. Many people in Costa Rica are of mixed ethnic origins. Naturally, Javier's interaction with his students and the people in the community are very friendly.*

Javier: The local people are generally friendly to me because they think I am from here. And when they find I am from Costa Rica they become more curious about me. I really like the Hawaiian way of interacting. Local people are very friendly, open to new ideas, and they like to be exposed to new things.



*Javier Mendez*

*Not all of us can follow Javier's path because we cannot undo our genetic component. And, because he doesn't rely on this initial advantage, Javier has made considerable efforts to get to know Hawai'i, which in turn enables him to relate to the students and the people in the community.*

Editor: How did you learn about the culture here?

Javier: First of all, I read books on Hawaiian history because I was interested in the history of how Hawai'i has come to

be how it is now. But my main education came when I was working as a tour guide for Spanish speaking people in the Big Island for two years. I learned history, culture, geology, geography, and mythology of Hawai'i for my jobs. Those fields of knowledge made me see things which I might have ignored. For instance, you see lots of offerings on the beaches and other places in the Big Island. Through these experiences I saw this culture as being alive and well, and real! I feel strongly that outsiders must refrain from passing judgement. Hawaiians indeed live in their own culture and their own cultural reality. It made me see things more clearly, deeply, and openly just to see their culture perpetuated in a form such as offerings.

*Katharina also stepped off-campus and plunged herself into the community to get to know Hawai'i better.*

Katharina: My first cultural shock in Hawai'i was being confronted with my own ignorance of the history of Hawai'i. My ignorance was embarrassing and confusing: I did not know where I 'fit in'. All of a sudden being of a different national and cultural background did not matter so much anymore: there were so many 'foreigners' here. I wasn't only a German, but I was a German haole. Again, I had to listen a lot. I literally felt speechless not knowing more about this

place and its contested history. Through my work at the Women's Center I had the opportunity to listen to a lot of women speaking on Hawaiian Sovereignty issues, and they taught me a lot. Somehow it was okay just listening without feeling passive. I like that distinction.

### **Tips for Improving Your Ability to Communicate Effectively.**

*Mai Hila Hila! No Shame! Javier and Katharina gave us some tips to improve our language ability without which we cannot even talk about the cross cultural experience. The basic recipe here is to use the local language, both Hawaiian, "Mai hila hila!", and Hawai'i Creole English, "No shame!".*

Javier: If I encounter a new phrase or new words, I will immediately ask my friends or look it up the dictionary. I try to use it in conversation. Some people may laugh at you when the words are not used properly, but that's how you learn a language. If you ask the question, they may laugh but that's about it. But if you are afraid to ask because you don't want to be laughed at the first time, you will be laughed at many times because you never got it right. So don't let your feeling of shame interrupt your learning process.

Katharina: I ask my friends to correct my language and then I return the favor if they ask for it. This is usually awkward at first, but your friends are your best teachers. I learned most of my English and Japanese this way.



### **Fourth Stop: SHOPPING**

Now that you are tanned and feeling totally relaxed, you need a little bit of stimulation: Time to shop!

Clothing:

Sera's, Quicksilver, Town & Country, and McCully Bike Shop (for men). Jeans Warehouse, Roxy Quicksilver, Town & Country, Contempo (for women). Gap, Old Navy, Abercrombie & Fitch (for both).

\*Tips for Dressing: Avoid colorful aloha shirts. People think you are a tourist or a tropical fish, as Frank De Lima would say. Wearing T-shirts and shorts everyday will transform your lifestyle effectively.

Other Items:

Flea Market/Swap Meet at the Aloha Stadium.

Chinatown

(For an Asian like myself, Chinatown is indispensable. However be warned; try to stay away from the sleazy areas after dark.)

Arts & Crafts Fairs and School Fairs

**Just as students are trying to get used to our ways of speech, we need to get used to theirs so we need to understand their accents, idiom and slang.**

## **“The Accent” Dilemma**

The most difficult aspect was trying to understand what the teacher said or meant. Sometimes the accent was extremely difficult to comprehend. It really got in the way of trying to learn.

Freshman—Business/Prelaw

The above comment is fairly representative of a concern often expressed by UH undergraduates with respect to the accented English of their international instructors. “The accent,” in their eyes, or rather their ears, was the most immediately perceivable barrier to learning from, and communicating with, International Teaching Assistants.

But what is this “accent”? It means that our pronunciation of English words and our intonations in the English language sound foreign to, and therefore hard to follow for, the local student population. And that means that a teacher from the United Kingdom or New Zealand whose first language is English speaks in accented English to the students as much as a teacher from China or India for whom English is either a foreign or second language. Of course, the degree of difficulty in understanding the British English speaker might be less for the local student because of that speaker’s fluency in the use of the English language and the student’s greater familiarity with British English. Students will have more difficulty understanding the Chinese or Japanese TA who is still a learner in the English language or the TA from South Asia, for example, whose variety of spoken English is unfamiliar to the local student. As we enter the classroom to teach at UH we need to be aware that however fluent and articulate we believe we are in the English language, many students will initially perceive a non-native speaker of English with accented English as interfering with their ability to learn.

Sometimes I could not understand it when they spoke. I completely sympathize, since English is their second language, but it also became difficult sometimes to function in class.

Junior—Fashion Promotion

Some students’ impatience with accented English appears to arise from ethnocentric expectations with regard to the outsider. There is a presupposition by some that “if you want to teach in our country speak & act like we do”. But more often than not, students’ preoccupation with the accent of their international teachers arises from causes that must be taken seriously. A sophomore in Hawaiian Studies expressed her cause for concern this way: “The teacher’s accent was a little heavy and during lectures I found myself trying to figure out *what* he was saying instead of grasping the meaning of his lecture.” A simple example will suffice. If students hear “I eat lice” when we say “I eat rice,” then common sense requires that she pause to figure what might substitute for “lice” before she can proceed with the more important task of comprehending the point we are trying to get across. And if she must mentally translate every now and then a particular word/phrase/sentence, it obviously takes away from her ability to understand the material presented.

It is very frustrating to go into a new class that covers new material and have to try to first decipher what is being said before you can even write it down.

Senior—Journalism/English

The difficulty in comprehension is worsened when the student is in a class where the commonly used vocabulary and concepts of the subject, whether Physics, Chemistry, or Political Science, are new to her. Because the emphasis in the United States is on liberal education, most students need not and do not enter university with a field of specialization in mind; unlike some other countries, their high school education does not necessarily emphasize training in a particular field or a set number of subjects. This means that at the Freshman and Sophomore levels at which TAs most frequently teach, we encounter students who might be combining disparate subjects in any given semester — from Theater and Chemistry to Food Science and Mathematics — some of which they will not have studied before. These students therefore will not have that familiarity with the basic concepts in a particular field — whether it is “theorem and calculus” in Mathematics or “gravity and relativity” in Physics — which will enable them to overcome the problems in comprehension caused by our unfamiliar pronunciation styles and intonation. Therefore, if we say “theorem” and they hear “theory,” some students may not have that basic competence in the field of Mathematics that would enable them to make the necessary mental correction. And many students are very polite, and therefore reluctant to ask for clarification.

ITAs can be very difficult to understand. Especially for science and medical classes when it is an absolute necessity for the students to grasp the material precisely.

Junior—Clinical Dietetics

The students’ discomfort with the accent becomes even more acute in subject areas that are perceived as difficult such as Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics. These are also the areas where there is heavy concentration of International Teaching Assistants. Students come into the class with the preconceived notion that the subject is difficult and if they encounter an instructor whose unfamiliar accent might make the comprehension of concepts and their applications even harder, their anxiety and fear of the subject is intensified. As a student in Zoology pointed out, “When concepts and vocabulary are new, clear pronunciation *or some other means is needed to explicitly get these things across*. If a teacher can’t communicate, students will not learn.”

ITAs should improve language skills. Some students have never experienced foreign accents, so difficult situations can occur.

Sophomore—Social Work

And yet an accent cannot be got rid of over a short period of time, surely not as soon as we arrive in the U.S. Although some U.S. mainland universities are experimenting with programs which will enable ITAs to become more “American” in their enunciation, UH has no such program. There is, however, a course in the department of English as a Second Language (ESL), ESL 111, designed to be of

assistance in teaching. In any case such programs will take time to produce the desired results, that is, minimized accents, while the new ITAs must confront the problem of effective communication in the classroom as soon as they arrive. We must therefore consider other means of either overcoming or working around this oft-cited impediment to communication between ITAs and their students.

It's not language that's the problem . . . teaching and maintaining student interest is important in any culture.

Senior—Communications

This student points out that the problem might not always be the accent. It could be that the teacher is presenting the course material at a level that is too advanced for the students in the class. S/he might be assuming a degree of familiarity with concepts and ideas in students that is simply not there. As mentioned before, students in the United States are not required to have prior familiarity with most courses they take at the Freshman and Sophomore levels. There might be students who are encountering Economics or Chemistry for the first time at the university. Hence, this disparity in knowledge among students, combined with their anticipations about the difficulty of the subject, can lead to a focus on the teacher's accent. As a Junior in Nursing confessed, "class material is difficult as it is, and the TA's language just makes it more difficult to learn." As ITAs, we are not in a position to remedy disparities within the U.S. educational system. What we can do is to find ways to make teaching more effective and facilitate communication between teacher and student under these circumstances.

Please speak at a slow pace and pronounce the words correctly so we can understand what you are saying or speaking.

Sophomore—Education

Learn to pronounce English words clearly. As long as people understand the words, your grammar is not that important because many of the students in Hawai'i speak pidgin English anyway.

Senior—Environmental Studies

It is heartening to see that most students who responded to the survey for this publication did not simply complain about the accent but offer solutions of their own. Since most students are willing to accommodate the accented English of their teachers, we must try in turn to compensate in other ways for the possibility of the accent becoming an impediment to learning. Many students asked that the instructor's lectures be accompanied by visual aids. Some suggested duplicated copies of class notes or the use of an overhead projector on which the important points to be discussed or presented that day could be listed. Liberal use of the chalkboard was also suggested so that TAs write words which they know they cannot pronounce well in English, or in cases where they know their pronunciation might differ from standard American pronunciation. It might also be a good idea for an ITA to compile a list of the basic, most commonly used vocabulary in a given subject, perhaps with help from others in one's

department at the beginning of the semester. This may be easier in the sciences where a basic vocabulary can more easily be defined. We would then benefit by going over the list with an American or a local TA in order to familiarize ourselves with the American pronunciation of such words and by working with students in class so that they become familiar not only with the vocabulary but also with our pronunciation of them.

Understanding their English was sometimes difficult. But explanation of their pronunciation styles helped us to understand their pronunciation better.

Senior—Journalism

Carmen's  
Thoughts:

*I have found it useful to bring the subject of "the accent" out into the open the first day of class. I always introduce myself to students on the first day of class by telling them where I am from and by locating this on a rough map of the world which I draw on the chalkboard. We then work on my name which introduces them to that all important notion of "difference"; I then tell them that just as they have a problem with my name, I will have problems with some of theirs. This suggests that we all have an accent in the ears of the other and that complaints about accents signify unfamiliarity with other ways of speaking. I acknowledge that I am sure to have an accent in their ears as they will in mine. I tell them that I would try to keep my accent in mind at all times and will try my best to speak clearly and slowly. If I were to forget sometimes and speak fast or unclearly, I tell them that they should not hesitate to stop me and ask for clarification. It is important that we convey to the students that it is okay to interrupt because many students are polite, and therefore reluctant, to interrupt their teachers. Therefore, we should not interpret interruptions by students as an affront to our dignity as teachers. According to one student, some ITAs show impatience at such interruptions "as though I am demeaning them," she says. I think this is an unnecessarily defensive posture.*

*I like the approach adopted by an ITA from India who resorted to jokes about difficult situations created by different accents and idioms—his accent, theirs, and those of others around the world—in order to make students more amenable to the idea of different accents. I have found it useful to cite certain words that I know I am pronouncing differently from them, words such as "class, dance, after, half, can't," so they know where my accented English might lead to differences in pronunciation. And throughout the semester I remain alert for visual clues on students' faces which would indicate to me that they are confused by some part of what I am saying. If the students' faces show bewilderment, I pause and ask why and repeat slowly or explain in other words when that is helpful.*

The international instructor knew exactly which words he couldn't pronounce well in English and wrote them on the board. He was also intuitive enough to know when we were confused.

Senior—Zoology

Obviously, students appreciate efforts by teachers to improve communications. Most students want us to speak clearly and slowly because they are interested in what we have to say. Therefore, it might be a good idea to repeat an idea sometimes. We may not get as much class material covered but what is important is the students' comprehension of the material we present, not the volume of material covered on any given day. We must always keep in mind that student concerns about accents arise from their desire to understand what we say.

ITAs are very knowledgeable with their subject and tend to talk too fast. So, take your time when lecturing. I know you have a lot to share.

Senior—Psychology

It might be that we are presenting material at a level that is too advanced for the students. That is why constant pauses and time for clarification are important. If we become concerned *in the difficult process of improving the accent*, we might be neglecting the other important task of presenting the class material at levels that are accessible to the students. It might be the case that self-consciousness about the accent will lead us to cloak our ideas in sophisticated vocabulary—in “big words,” as it were—as a means of retaining some sense of self-worth. But the use of academic vocabulary is not the solution to students' difficulty with at our accents; by doing so, we will only create more alienation from students. Instead, we must try to be less defensive about our accent; to not regard it only as a weakness or lack on our part. It can be seen as one aspect that constitutes difference among groups of people and that affects communication between teacher and students in the classroom. There are students who appreciate the exposure to foreign accents that the international teachers provide. Acknowledge the accent as early as possible. The students will know, as soon as we speak, that we have an accent! But by showing the students that we remain aware of the accent, they won't fear it so much or feel the need to drop the class purely on this account.

I gained a better trained ear for language/accents through my interactions with international instructors.

Senior—Journalism/Chinese

Most students are like the Zoology Senior who suggests that we “practice English by immersing yourselves in English speaking situations.” It is an important suggestion because communication is not one-way.

Just as students are trying to get used to our ways of speech, we need to get used to theirs so we understand their accents, idiom and slang. If we cannot fully comprehend or follow their speech

patterns, we will not be able to help them become full participants in the teaching/learning process in the classroom. If we greet their contributions with looks of incomprehension, we will silence them or unwittingly pass over valuable contributions from them to the discussion. One way we can familiarize ourselves with the way students speak is to show interest in their idiomatic expressions or slang, and then ask them to repeat and explain these to us in other words. Most students will enjoy the teacher taking this role, one that requires a sense of humility on our part! And valuable exposure to pidgin English and local mannerisms can be found in television programs and newspapers, as well as in associations with local students outside of the classroom and with our fellow graduate students. Associations with mainland U.S. and local students can enable us to incorporate some local and mainstream U.S. idioms and words into our speech; these, in turn, will facilitate our interactions with students because now we no longer feel, speak, or act as such an outsider in the classroom.

Learn our language. Talk and live with native speakers of English and of pidgin.

Senior, Journalism

Gain a better understanding of local terms. In other words, students sometimes speak 'locally,' in terms that ITAs don't understand. Thus it's sometimes hard to communicate.

Freshman—Liberal Arts

Of course, most of us are tempted, especially in our first semester or two, to stay (or "hang out" as students here would say) with our own national and linguistic communities, to speak in our mother tongue, eat our ethnic foods, and associate with those who are not strangers to us. This is a natural reaction to being away from home and from the familiar cultural environment. But if we want to make this new place, Hawai'i, our own, then we need to venture out of that community of our nationals and make friends with others who can introduce us to some facets of our new cultural environment. It is only by taking that initially frightening but courageous step that we can begin to recognize the problem of cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom and find ways to negotiate those differences. We will then become less intimidating in our role as teachers in the classroom. As a Sophomore in International Business put it:

At first it may be hard for us students to comprehend exactly what you are saying but be patient and as we get more used to you, you will in turn become more used to us.

C.W.





## **Fifth Stop: CLASSES**

Now you are back at the campus and thinking about the classes to take for the next semester. Outside of your department:

Language Classes (Language classes are the best place to get to know the people from Hawai'i. The best experience I had was Hawaiian class.)

Hawaiian Studies and Ethnic Studies (If you want to know about this place more systematically, these classes will offer you the historical and structural framework to the knowledge.)

Music Classes (There are Hula dance, Okinawan ensemble, Japanese Taiko Drum Music, Filipino music and lots of others!)

Night School (Kaimuki, McKinley, Farrington, and other high schools offer courses for adults. )

Hemenway Leisure Classes (There are a variety of classes. I took a silk screen class and made my own T-shirts)

**Comments and observations by groups of ITAs and students based on their personal experiences at UH**

## **Communication Is The Bridge!**

Having talked with many experienced ITAs at UH, and having listened to the perceptions of many undergraduates at UH regarding international instructors, we have come to the realization that the goals of the first group in their roles as teachers and the expectations of the second in their roles as students ultimately converge. *The ITAs want to be good teachers; the students want good teachers.* Indeed, many ITAs we talked to did not seem unduly bothered by their status as international teachers at UH; that is, they did not see that in itself as a barrier. Already aware that communication was "inter-national" when the teacher is foreign to the student community, the concerns of ITAs were more focused on how to improve communications between themselves and the students in order to be effective teachers in the classroom. It appears that many had found their own means of overcoming the barriers of culture and unfamiliar accent while students mentioned differences in culture and accent only when those interfered with their ability to learn and communicate in class. The following list of helpful tips and suggestions from comments and observations made by groups of teachers and students based on their personal experiences at UH may assist incoming ITAs.

### **Be Aware of Your Accent and Inadequacies in English Language Skills**

The accent will be the most immediately noticeable marker of our foreignness to the students. Some students will make a decision whether or not to take the class based on the teacher's accent; others will wonder, and perhaps worry about, whether the teacher's

accent will interfere with their ability to communicate with, or learn from, a particular teacher. We ITAs should not therefore behave as if the accent did not exist, or was not a consideration in classroom interactions.

On the first day of class I said, "I know something about math, so I'll teach you math. You know something about English, so you teach me English"!

ITA from China—Math

I joke, yes, laugh about accents. I tell jokes about accents, about difficult or funny incidents that arise because of different accents.

ITA from India—History

It helps when the teacher acknowledges s/he has an accent and explains his/her pronunciation style.

Senior—Sociology

As these two ITAs and the student point out, it helps if the accent becomes a topic of discussion in class so students need not harbor unexpressed fears about the accent. The ITA from China, who is still working on his spoken English, makes students his helpers in the effort to overcome the barrier posed by his poor English and thick accent; he invites them to become his teachers when it comes to language. On the other hand, the ITA from India who speaks fluent English but in an unfamiliar accent, demonstrates to the students that accent is an unavoidable reality of international communication; jokes help them overcome that initial awkwardness posed by their accents—the students' accents *and* his. Both ITAs make "accent" open to comment and discussion so that students will not hesitate to interrupt them and ask for clarification when it is necessary.

### **Find Other Ways of Compensating for the Difficulty Posed by Accent**

If the students cannot understand or follow what we are saying, they cannot learn. It is therefore necessary that we become creative in getting our points across if we feel our spoken language skills are not adequate to the task. I try several different ways to communicate through the language barrier.

ITA—Math

In large auditorium classes, the use of a microphone and speaking more slowly is helpful. Use the board a lot. But don't cover the blackboard print as it is being written; ask often "do you understand what I mean by . . ."; when writing chemical and scientific formulas, write very carefully and pause as you go so students can write and keep track with you.

Graduate Student—Unclassified

An ITA from China told us that he wrote a lot on the board until he recovered confidence in his speech and until the students got used to his accent and pronunciation style. Students, in their turn, asked for slower and clearer enunciation from the ITAs and visual aids to supplement speech. Finally, it is important not to proceed on the assumption that when we say something it is immediately and easily accessible to every student in the class.

### **Don't Assume a Standardized Knowledge of the Subject in All Students**

They come to class without a theoretical background in the subject. When Chemistry is taught, students come from all over the place, all the other departments . . . so they're not in the mood, the "Chemistry mood."

ITA from Sri Lanka

In a Science course, I found it difficult to relate to instructions from the teacher who presumed a more advanced background of the subject in the students.

Junior—Pacific Island Studies

Before I came here, I thought the students' understanding of the subject would be greater than it is.

ITA from China

The instructor expected us to automatically understand the concept of what was being taught even if we barely knew what was going on.

Sophomore—Travel Industry Management

As mentioned in a previous section of this guide, an emphasis on liberal education in the United States leaves students free to combine subjects of their own choosing even at college level. This means that they might be taking a class for which they have had little or no prior preparation. ITAs who teach introductory level courses, therefore, should not assume either prior preparation in the subject or uniformity in the level of comprehension among all students in his/her class. Some students will come to the class with background knowledge of the subject, while others may have none; there may be both seniors and freshmen in the same class fulfilling a requirement. In such a situation, the ITA must first figure out at what level(s) s/he should teach. An ITA in Math suggests: "Watch their *faces!*" When you teach be careful that students can reach the level you've decided upon; that it's not so hard that they can't reach it." If we teach at a level that is too high, students will become discouraged and will not even try. No one gains in such a situation.

Be willing to take the time to explain difficult concepts on an elementary level. A specific example would be the concepts of Physics. Some students get frustrated at foreign instructors who know a subject matter well but do not explain it in simple terms. It may cause some students to take a defen-

sive posture and blame the instructor for not being able to teach.

Graduate Student—Education  
Technology

Some students do not enter the class prepared for the subject. And since they can't go to Professor X and say "lousy job," they blame the ITA. They cannot separate the difficulty of the science of Economics and the effectiveness of the TA.

ITA—Economics

The question for the ITA, therefore, is how to explain difficult subject matter in simple terms. An ITA in Political Science asks, "how does one simplify difficult concepts like ideology or social systems?" But, an ITA from History suggests, "it's essential to simplify" if we wish all our students to understand what we are talking about. So use examples from everyday life to illustrate difficult concepts, says this ITA from History: "I ask if anyone has had these experiences, and everyone has. You have to get into the culture here. I talk of what's important to them: sovereignty, Polynesian Cultural Center, spirits, King Kamehameha . . . use everything!" An ITA from Math told us that he used activities associated with banking—deposits, interest rates, percentages—to explain mathematical problems. An ITA from Economics suggests the following:

"Put theory in simple terms. Get their participation. What is this GNP, and so forth. Then put it into a more holistic frame. Try to meet them half-way. Make it possible for them to go back to the newspapers, better informed. Simple examples let students see the connection between what they study in class and their lives outside the classroom. And that is added incentive to learn."

### **Students Expect Teachers to Make Learning Enjoyable, Interactive, Stimulating, Motivating...**

While ITAs are brilliant in their fields, sometimes teaching techniques are archaic, that is, there is no stimulation. It may help to take a course in education, because brilliance in the field does not equal great teaching. Maybe this should go for all instructors, not just foreign ones!

Graduate Student—Secondary  
Education

I think that it would help to do some classroom observation before actually teaching a class. In this way, ITAs can learn about the students' mannerisms and the language and types of questions asked.

Senior—Communications

In students here, the excitement is greater, they are more open, more receptive than at home.

ITA—History

It's important to construct the curriculum so they get excited.

ITA—Political Science

Students in the United States expect their teachers to motivate them to learn. They do not want a full fifty or seventy-five minute lecture from their teachers. They want teachers to vary their modes of transmitting knowledge. Short lectures interspersed with discussion groups, question-and-answer sessions, and student presentations, for instance, might be more effective as a teaching strategy than a long lecture. We ITAs will want to become familiar with new and various teaching techniques. The materials and workshops offered on campus by the Center for Teaching Excellence might be one source for such innovative techniques in the field of teaching. Another source would be experienced TAs and teachers in one's own department; observing experienced teachers in the classroom is very helpful in devising one's own teaching strategies. Some departments have graduate level courses on teaching the discipline. As the two students above point out, it is not enough to know the subject matter; the teacher must also employ innovative means of presenting that subject matter to the students.

The ITAs we spoke to all acknowledged the importance of honoring the students motivations for learning. An ITA in Math, while confessing that it is difficult to motivate in his subject, explained his methods the following way: "I add ingredients, color, give something a beautiful name (like "rose"), give a piece of history ("this equation was an open problem 300 years ago"), give practical applications." An ITA from History suggested the following strategy to get students to read the books on the syllabus: "Talk about the book before they read, make them *want* to read it. Show your passion for the book, then they'll get it." This ITA saw opportunities to facilitate learning in one's very demeanor in class: "It's how you stand, your voice. And after ten seconds, move!" Both ITAs also stressed the importance of humor in the classroom as a means of keeping student interest: "Just get them into the culture of humor! When telling a story about a Russian, speak in a Russian accent! Perform!" The task of the ITA from Math, however, was a little more difficult: "Yes, I can joke around Mathematics! There are some mathematical jokes. But . . . you have to know Mathematics to get them!"

### **Treat Students with Respect**

I think ITAs should be more open to students who ask questions or make suggestions on how to conduct the class.

Senior—Broadcast Journalism

We must show students we care, that we are interested.

ITA from India—History

Some ITAs showed impatience when asked to repeat something. Also there is an eagerness to pass on what they know but an unwillingness to learn and absorb what we know

about this culture. I would suggest that they be more accommodating, open-minded, and have patience when questioned.

Junior—Environmental Studies

I learn from my students.

ITA China—Math

Students in the United States do not want to be treated simply as passive recipients for knowledge which flows one way—from teacher, *to* student. They want to be active participants in the learning process through their questions and comments. That is, they want to have some say in how the class is conducted. Students expect an interactive environment in the classroom and we need to give up any of our different notions of teacher-student relations which might conflict with this expectation. If not, students will think of us as strict disciplinarians who are closed to them.

### **Be Sensitive to Issues and Aspects of the Local Culture**

Learn a little about the history of Hawai'i and politics so you don't inadvertently insult anyone.

Senior—Print Journalism

Learn about the local cultures, local problems and issues, and learn enough English to get your point across.

Senior—Library Studies

Gain a better understanding of local terms. In other words, students sometimes speak in local terms that ITAs don't understand. Thus it's sometimes hard to communicate.

Freshman—Liberal Arts

We must not operate on the assumption that Hawai'i is just another state in the United States of America. Hawai'i has its own unique ethnic and cultural composition which might surprise the newcomer as it did an ITA from History who came to Hawai'i with an image of "the American" as "blonde, white, blue-eyed." The history of Hawai'i as a member-state of the United States is also unique and under contention even today as the on-going movement for sovereignty makes clear. We may arrive in Hawai'i with a stereotypical image of "the American," or of Hawai'i as a place where pretty young women in grass skirts and garlands of flowers perform hula on white sand beaches. But it is necessary that we divest ourselves of these dominant stereotypes when we see around us the ethnic and cultural diversity and real-life politics obscured by those stereotypes. In other words, we should acquire a sense of place and be receptive to what goes on around us on these islands called Hawai'i. That way, we can make our subject matter more cohesive with where we are—for instance, use what is available in Hawai'i to explain an idea or concept—and show our students that we care about knowing who they are outside the classroom and what makes their lives meaningful. If we do that, we will remain sensitive to the issues that are of importance to the local community; and we will know that students are speaking in their own language if they happen to use pidgin in class.

## Never Stop Learning

I suggest ITAs ask for help when they need it.

Junior—Pacific Island Studies

Don't be afraid of students. A positive outlook will reflect in your teaching and communications.

Senior—Economics

Be flexible, understanding, do not expect this situation to be similar to the past, be ready for a new environment, be willing to learn.

Senior—Zoology

ITAs should not hesitate to ask for help from students if they need it whether it is with the English language or with information on a topic where they feel their knowledge is inadequate. In most cases, students will not think any less of us for asking for their help. If we have established a rapport with our students so that they respect our abilities and appreciate what we do, they will not think we are incompetent for asking them to contribute what they know. Remember, students in the U.S. want to actively participate in the learning process! We must remember that we *too* are learning, and that we *can* learn, from our students in the classroom.

Finally, as an ITA from History says, we must learn as we go. For the ITA from Math, whose spoken English may presently be seen by some as somewhat inadequate, this has meant taking every opportunity to improve his English. He values every chance he is given to practice his oral skills. But he speaks of some of his Chinese friends who "make friends only with Chinese. I have a friend who wants a roommate, but turned down a native English speaker. I asked him: But why? He said: He's not Chinese, he speaks English!" Obviously, the ITA who is curious about the place s/he now lives in and wishes to improve his/her English language skills, cannot take such an attitude to cross-cultural interaction. Instead, we must utilize every opportunity we are offered to learn, and the students we teach should be regarded as one of our best sources of information. As a TA in Second Language Acquisition suggests: Learn as much as you can from students. My teaching continues to blossom as a result of my interacting with students in positive ways. I see them as peers—we're all here to learn. Follow the lead of the students'. Remember they want *you* to succeed too!

C.W.

## **An Open Letter of Thanks to My Students**

My Dear Students:

Thank you so much for your excellent evaluation of my course and for the opportunity to teach you . I was pleasantly surprised to receive letters of recommendation from some of you. This was a unique experience for me and, honestly, was one of the sweetest rewards I ever had received in my academic career.

I will continue my philosophy of teaching for which you have shown so much appreciation. I always believe that class is a social community with goals and interests common to all participants, and where the students and teachers grow together. Reciprocal learning, based on two-way interaction, is an important aspect of my teaching philosophy. I also believe that rather than creating an authoritarian structure, which generates a lot of tension between students and the teacher, if an instructor is able to create a more friendly atmosphere in the class and treat the students with more respect and sensitivity, the students will be able to participate in the class discussion with more challenging and creative ideas. Such an interaction will be productive both for the teacher and the students.

I am encouraged by your response and support and I will always remember your positive contribution to my growth as a teacher.

Sincerely Yours,  
Kishore C. Dash, *TA*, Political Science



*Kishore Dash in his "Introduction to American Politics" class*