How Does Who Our Students Are Affect How We Teach?

VIU is an open access university, attracting a diverse set of students: many of our learners are mature, ‘non-traditional’ age, returning to University after having worked for a number of years. We have a relatively large percentage of First Nation, Aboriginal learners choosing to study at VIU. Most of our students commute every day to come to VIU. We also attract a large number of international students from Asia, the Middle East, India and Europe. Many students work part or full-time off-campus, and are also caring for families alongside their studies. We serve many “first generation” students, i.e. students who are the first ones in their family to attend university. And of course, some of our students have more “traditional” characteristics: they are ‘traditional age’ (18-22); live on campus; work part-time on campus; and study full-time.

It is important to understand who your learners are so that you can appropriately design learning experiences and meet their needs.

Cognitive and Emotional Development

Our students are on an intellectual journey that takes them through various stages of thinking as they encounter new ideas and new ways to understand the world. Sometimes, as they struggle with new ideas, it may seem as if these stages or phases of cognitive and emotional development are getting in their way. However, if we accept that moving through stages of
intellectual complexity and sophistication is normal on anyone’s path of learning, we can help our students with their intellectual struggles. If we are aware of and can anticipate the stages they are likely to experience, we are better able to respond effectively and assist students in becoming critical thinkers. We will also be able to let go of the frustration that comes our way when students resist certain kinds of thinking, or seem stuck with perspectives that do not serve them well in their learning.

The Perry Scheme

The Perry Scheme is one tool that many instructors find useful for diagnosing where students are on their intellectual journey. The late William Perry, professor at Harvard, originally published his research in 1970, using as his subjects the white males in his university courses. Subsequent researchers have updated the original thesis, to uncover its relevance for a broader population.

Perry identifies four basic stages in the evolution of an individual’s thinking. The summary provided here is a pragmatic simplification of the scheme. In general, Perry’s research describes the four basic stages in the following terms.

**Dualism** (black and white thinking)
- Knowledge is viewed as received Truth; things are either right or wrong
- Teacher is the authority who has all the Answers
- Learning means memorizing, finding the “right” answer, getting the “A”
- Common Dualist question: Will this be on the test? Will you tell us the right answer?

**Frustrations for students at the dualist phase**
- Memorizing worked in high school, why not now?
- Why won’t the teacher answer my questions?
- Questions without clear-cut answers are “tricky,” unfair and not useful.

**Multiplicity** (everything is grey)
- All knowledge is suspect; all opinions and statements are equally OK
- Teacher may be the authority, but he/she represents just another opinion
- Learning means playing the teacher’s game to get the “A”

**Frustrations for students at the multiplist phase**
- How can the teacher evaluate my work if it’s just a matter of OPINION whether it’s good or bad?
- Grades are based on whom the professor likes...

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Relativism (Everything has a context)

- Knowledge is suspect, but some things are supported by evidence and reasons
- Teacher is a conversation partner, acts as guide, shows the direction, helps students discover
- Learning means realizing that what we “know” is colored by perspective and assumptions. Facts, data are essential, but not sufficient.

Frustrations for students at the relativist stage

- I need more information and more than one perspective, but this class is narrow.
- Traditional university classes are often not challenging enough
- I’m surrounded by students who are clueless.

Commitment in Relativism (knowledge has an impact on who we are, on our moral being)

- Knowledge affects personal actions outside the classroom
- What matters: facts, feelings and perspectives and how I will act upon them
- Teacher is a source among other sources
- Learning includes making choices, and taking responsibility for those choices

Further Reading:


Supporting Diversity in the Classroom

VIU has a number of supports for faculty and students around ensuring diversity is welcomed and valued in the classroom.

- Aboriginal Students: [http://www2.viu.ca/sas/](http://www2.viu.ca/sas/)
- International Students: [http://www2.viu.ca/international/InternationalStudentAdvising.asp](http://www2.viu.ca/international/InternationalStudentAdvising.asp)
- Positive Space: [http://www2.viu.ca/PositiveSpace/](http://www2.viu.ca/PositiveSpace/)
- Disability Services: [http://www2.viu.ca/disabilityservices/](http://www2.viu.ca/disabilityservices/)
- Human Rights Office: [http://www2.viu.ca/humanrights/](http://www2.viu.ca/humanrights/)

Indigenous Students

Indigenous students come from many backgrounds and types of experience and there is no single way to describe their previous experience, nor their academic experience at the university. But it is important to remember that Indigenous students come from a culture that prioritizes respect, learning through listening and watching quietly, learning from personal experience, and acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of relations between people and the world. These ways of knowing and learning are not always consistent with the expectations of a university.
classroom that receives its norms from western European culture. European culture often privileges active participation in whole-class discussion, rapid-fire answering of questions, abstract conceptual thinking and objective rather than personal approaches to understanding the world. Additionally, the European classroom has historically been a place where Indigenous ways of knowing have been actively and intentionally suppressed, so our Indigenous students may arrive in our classrooms with a certain wariness about how well they will fit in and whether they will be successful in what may be a hostile environment.

Map of Vancouver Island of First Nations

VIU faculty have been experimenting with strategies to help Indigenous student know that they are welcome in the classroom, and that their ways of knowing and being are an asset to the learning that can happen there. Just some of the strategies they have employed include:

- Beginning the class with the traditional acknowledgement that we are living and learning on un-ceded Indigenous land. VIU has campuses on the traditional territories of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, the Cowichan Tribes, the Sna-naw-as First Nation, and the Tla’amin First Nation. Acknowledging this fact on the first day of class goes a long way toward letting Indigenous students know that they are welcome and that the faculty member understands a little about their history and culture.
- Setting up the classroom (either permanently or only on some class days) as a talking circle
Inviting an Elder to teach in the class during the semester
Allowing for multiple ways of participating in discussion and class activities, not just acknowledging the first hand up
Designing assignments that have multiple formats and ways to submit
Designing assignments that allow students to bring their personal experiences into play
Designing experiential activities that align with course learning outcomes
Including Indigenous perspectives as part of the curriculum, not just as an add-on at the end of a chapter.

VIU Elders
At Vancouver Island University (VIU) our Elders are one of our most valuable resources. They provide counseling, support, and guidance to all students at VIU. You will often hear the students referring to the Elders as "Auntie" or "Uncle", which is a sign of both affection and respect. Vancouver Island University Elders are active in a variety of areas encompassing student support, class-room instruction, teaching traditional protocols and cross-cultural sharing.

In 2011, a special project was undertaken by Dr. Melody Martin and Dr. Laurie Meijer Drees (First Nations Department) that looked at the “Elders-in-Residence” at VIU. They conducted a study interviewing and surveying students and faculty at VIU (as well as surveying 18 other institutions across Canada), reported on results and made recommendations of which many have been put in place at VIU.

From interviews conducted during the study, the following positive impacts on students were mentioned. For example, they suggested Elders at VIU:

- provide a particular and important kind of guidance for students,
- inspire students with cultural teachings and stories,
- bring a spiritual presence to campus,
- offer counsel to students experiencing life challenges,
- foreground a holistic approach to interacting with students,
- maintain an emotional balance in the classroom,
- pass on beneficial traditional teachings to students,
- promote “groundedness” for students,
- teach active listening through the stories,
- encourage students to value the wisdom that Elders can bring,
- model respect for culture,
- reassure First Nations students,
• play a critical role in student retention,
• help build a bridge between VIU and First Nations students who may have had previous bad associations with educational institutions,
• bring meaningful teachings that are good for all students

“Uy’shqwwaluunts kw’us l ulup xwu’ ‘iutl’ Snuneymuxw”

Martin and Meijer Drees go on to indicate that many of the same positive impacts listed above also relate to faculty. Here are some quotes from VIU teaching faculty members:

- “has changed the way we do things overall…There are protocols that are in place and our administration continually acknowledges the territory that we are in”
- “has changed me in all aspects of myself as a human being”
- “adds an extra dimension of knowledge and wisdom that many of the instructors don’t have”
- “provides local knowledge and ways of doing things”
- “encourages everyone to pause…for a moment”
- “defuses situations”
- has helped our faculty take “the first tangible step in building culture”
- helps faculty “teach with respect to the [First Nations] culture”

**Contact Information for Elders**

If you should have questions or wish to invite an Elder to your class, please contact Aboriginal Education and Engagement: Sylvia Scow, Aboriginal Project Coordinator & Elder Support, (250) 753-3245, local 2096, Email: [Sylvia.Scow@viu.ca](mailto:Sylvia.Scow@viu.ca)
1st Generation Students

First generation students are those who the first in their families to attend university. Venturing out in this way takes a significant amount of courage and adventurousness. VIU attracts a significant number of these students, who bring with them some challenges for learning.

First generation students often do not understand, and are initially unprepared for the expectations of a university classroom. Their personal experience of classrooms ended in High School, and they have no siblings or parents who can give them advice. There may be many questions they don’t know to ask, and many resources they do not know how to find. They may not know how to apply for financial aid; be seeing a course outline or syllabus for the first time; need help understanding deadlines and grasping academic standards. They often do not know about the many resources at VIU (the Writing Centre, Math Learning Center, Advising, Counselling, Disabilities, Health clinic, Technology Helpdesk, etc.) and thus waste time trying to work things out alone.

These students also often have added pressures from home. Their parents and siblings and friends do not understand how to succeed at university, and expect their student to continue doing everything he or she did before registering for classes. They are more likely to hold down full time jobs, care for family members, and face financial pressures than other students. They may also experience incomprehension or backlash from family members and friends for stepping outside the conventional norms of their community. All of these pressures can make university an almost insurmountable experience.

Some ideas for helping first generation students succeed:

- Arrange office hours at times and on days when most of your students can attend. Create opportunities for office hours in addition, to accommodate complicated student schedules. Never tire of inviting students to your office. Encourage them to come singly or in small groups for study sessions.
- In face-to-face courses, encourage students to connect with you before or after class, when they are already on campus.
- Create a welcoming online presence so students can connect with you outside of class.
- Be responsive to students, but also clearly explain any limitations you have for responding, especially electronically (i.e. “if you email me I’ll get back to you within 48 hours if it’s a weekend, otherwise it’s 24 hours”)
- Create very clear course outlines with expectations, deadlines, contact information and resources clearly explained.

“A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the [student] with a desire to learn is hammering on a cold iron.”
— Horace Mann
Create assignments with flexible formats, and that can include students’ personal experience in the world when possible

- Be familiar with all the resources available to students so that you can help them connect with those they need

**Mature and Returning Students**
Mature and returning students have many of the same pressures as first generation students. They work, care for families and are often concerned about finances. At the same time, they are often very focused on their personal goals, and clear on why they have come back to school. Additionally, their life experience sometimes helps them see connections to the material that younger students cannot yet make. However, since their academic classroom experience is some years old, they often worry about their ability to keep up with their younger peers in the university classroom and about their writing and math skills. Additionally, they are less likely than traditional age students to create a network of friends, and so often feel isolated at the university.

The strategies that help mature and returning students are similar to those for first generation students. Welcome them in your class, let all students see their experience of the world as an added asset, encourage them to ask for assistance, and supply them with the many resources VIU has to offer students.

**International Students**
VIU attracts international students from many different continents and cultures. These students usually come to us highly motivated, but are often unprepared for the culture of the Canadian classroom. They have many practical issues to solve with regards to immigration, insurance, housing and work. They also have to master a new culture and very different academic expectations than in their home countries. And they are doing all of this in a language that they have not yet fully mastered, and looking through cultural lenses that do not always square with how things work in Canada. International students are often away from home for the first time, and experience homesickness and cultural disorientation while taking on a full academic load. Because of their language and culture differences, they may also experience isolation from their peers in the classroom and high stress around their academic performance.

International Student services helps students with advice on immigration, insurance, housing, and other practical aspects of moving to Canada. They also provide academic advising, ESL classes, peer helpers, and much more.
However, unless you are teaching in the International Education Faculty, the international students in your classes will already be beyond the initial preparatory courses and workshops offered by International Student Services. Your international students are expected to perform just like any Canadian student in the class. This does not preclude some challenges with language, culture, and classroom expectations. The three largest challenges are writing skills; oral comprehension and communication; and academic expectations—especially expectations around participation in class discussions and conventions of writing academic papers.

Some ideas for helping International students succeed:

- Create opportunities in class for collaborative learning, small group discussions so students can practice their thinking before being expected to speak before the whole class.
- Call on various students (not just the liveliest ones) when reporting out from small group discussions (“Li, what did your group talk about?”)
- Explain and clarify expectations around scholarly writing such as what plagiarism looks like, how to cite sources properly, how to create a list of references, etc.
- Be extra clear about assignments, expectations and policies
- Include topics and resources with a more international flavour
- Provide a lecture outline and lecture notes online
- Reduce jargon and explain key words
- Create assignments with flexible formats, and that can include students' personal experience in the world when possible
- Never tire of inviting students to your office. Encourage them to come singly or in small groups for study sessions.
- In face-to-face courses, encourage students to connect with you before or after class, when they are already in the same room with you. This lowers the barrier to talking with you
- Create a welcoming online presence so students can connect with you outside of class.
- Be responsive to students, but also clearly explain any limitations and timeframes you have for responding so they don’t think you are ignoring them
- Be familiar with all the resources available to students so that you can help them connect with those they need

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities, be they physical, cognitive, or issues of mental health, have as much of a right to study and improve their lives as any other students. A disability may put a student at a disadvantage, not because he or she cannot perform academically, but because the conditions under which a course is habitually taught includes barriers to that student that do not exist for students without disabilities. For this reason, there are arrangements put in place to support
students with disabilities so that they have a more level playing field when they are in an academic setting. Such arrangements are commonly called “accommodations”.

Vancouver Island University is committed to providing access to education for students with documented disabilities and recognizes the legal duty to provide reasonable accommodations to students with a documented disability. Students must provide faculty members a letter from Disabilities Access Services describing the accommodations to which they have a right.

The student has been advised to meet with you privately during office hours to discuss arrangements for accommodation. Acknowledge and be supportive of the student’s requirements. Never ask what the student’s disability is: that information is personal and legally protected. The student may self-disclose, but the faculty member may not ask. Come to a clear agreement regarding the implementation of the accommodations listed in the letter from Disabilities Access Services.

Not all students with disabilities will disclose that they have a right to accommodation at the beginning of the semester, even if you invite them to. This may be because they do not wish to share such personal information, or because they do not even know they have a disability. Some students with disabilities do not learn that they have one until they are already at risk of failing a class. The stressors of academic performance along with other things happening in a student’s life may also trigger episodes where the student is unable to perform in the same way that students without disabilities do.

Some ideas for helping students with disabilities succeed:

- During the first class make an announcement about Disabilities Access Services. Let students know you are aware and supportive of services that help students learn.

- Include a welcome statement in your course syllabus such as: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodation, please feel free to approach me and/or Disability Access Services (DAS) as soon as possible. The DAS staff is available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. They are located in Building 200 and can be reached at 250 740 6446. The sooner you let us know your needs the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.
If you notice a student struggling and you suspect it might be a disability, refer the student to Disabilities Access Services and discuss with the student teaching and learning alternatives that might help the student succeed. Try not to diagnose a disability.

Treat students with disabilities as you would other students, with the exception of the accommodations that are helping them succeed. Students with disabilities should have the same opportunities to succeed or fail as anyone else. Their work must be equivalent to that of their peers (attend class, meet deadlines, complete assignments) unless otherwise specified in their Letter for Instructors from Disabilities Access Services.

Be prepared to offer flexibility in assignment deadlines and formats, to help students succeed. The goal is always to provide equal opportunity to master the essentials of your course.

Be aware of the kinds of accommodations that might be required.
### How to Identify and Respond to Concerns About Student Performance

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<tr>
<th>Observed Behaviour</th>
<th>Connect and Inform</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Concern</strong>&lt;br&gt;Examples include:&lt;br&gt;  o Change in academic performance&lt;br&gt;  o Failing&lt;br&gt;  o Absenteeism&lt;br&gt;  o Classroom management issues</td>
<td>o Speak to the student directly&lt;br&gt; o Document details of concerns and any meetings and/or other communication&lt;br&gt; o Refer to the Student Academic Code of Conduct&lt;br&gt; o Share/report concerns with your Program Chair, Associate Dean, and/or Dean&lt;br&gt; o Submit a referral through <strong>EARLY ALERT</strong>&lt;br&gt;</td>
<td><strong>Counselling Services</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6416&lt;br&gt; <strong>Advising</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6410&lt;br&gt; <strong>Disability Access Services</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6446&lt;br&gt; <strong>Services for Aboriginal Students</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6510&lt;br&gt; <strong>International Student Services</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6315&lt;br&gt; <strong>VIU Student Health Clinic</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6620</td>
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<td><strong>Change in Mood or Behaviour</strong>&lt;br&gt;Examples include:&lt;br&gt;  o Distressed in written or verbal expression, appearance and/or action.</td>
<td>o Speak to the student directly and, if appropriate, inform him/her about the available resources.&lt;br&gt; o Document details of concerns and any meetings and/or other communication&lt;br&gt; o Refer to the Student Code of Conduct (if required)&lt;br&gt; o Share/report concerns with your Program Chair, Associate Dean, and/or Dean&lt;br&gt; o Submit a referral through <strong>EARLY ALERT</strong>&lt;br&gt;</td>
<td><strong>As above – and:</strong>&lt;br&gt; <strong>Director, Student Affairs</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6406/6416&lt;br&gt; <strong>Office of Student Affairs (Conduct)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Disruptive and/or Disrespectful</strong>&lt;br&gt;Examples include:&lt;br&gt;  o Inappropriate language&lt;br&gt;  o Sending numerous emails or phone calls - with some inappropriate content&lt;br&gt;  o Refusing to follow directions&lt;br&gt;  o Yelling</td>
<td>o Speak to the student directly and, if appropriate, inform him/her about the available resources.&lt;br&gt; o Document details of concerns and any meetings and/or other communication&lt;br&gt; o Refer to the Student Code of Conduct and/or submit an <strong>Incident Report.</strong></td>
<td><strong>As above – and:</strong>&lt;br&gt; <strong>Director, Student Affairs</strong>&lt;br&gt; 250-740-6406/6416&lt;br&gt; <strong>Office of Student Affairs (Conduct)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Erratic and/or Acute Distress</strong></td>
<td><strong>Threat of Danger to Self and/or Others</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contact Information</strong></td>
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<td>Examples include:</td>
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<td>o Aggressive words or actions</td>
<td>o First - get help immediately – call 911</td>
<td><strong>250-740-6426/6276</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>o Damage to property</td>
<td>o Then - call campus security 250-740-6600 or local 6600</td>
<td><strong>Director,</strong> <strong>International Student Services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>o Persistent unwanted contact by phone, email, social media or in-person</td>
<td>o Finally - contact the Risk and Threat Assessment Team (RTAT)</td>
<td>250-740-6384</td>
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<td>o Speak to the student directly and, if appropriate, inform him/her about the available resources.</td>
<td><strong>Health and Safety</strong></td>
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<td>o Document details of concerns and any meetings and/or other communication</td>
<td>250-740-6283</td>
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<td>o Submit an Incident Report</td>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
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<td>o Refer to the Office of Student Affairs (Conduct) or Health and Wellness (Director, Student Affairs)</td>
<td>250-740-6600</td>
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<td>o Report concerns to Program Chair, Associate Dean, and/or Dean</td>
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**As above – and:**

- **Island Crisis Society**
  1-888-494-3888
- **RTAT**
  250-740-6406 or 6426/6276