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Are considerations of ethnicity and culture relevant when teaching international students? An exploration of Biggs's Three Levels of Teaching

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Introduction

John Biggs's work has had a marked impact on the development of theory and practice of teaching and learning in higher education. Dunkin (1998) comments that the "breadth and depth" (p. v) of Biggs's work represents a significant contribution to the understanding of teaching and learning in higher education and places him "among the world's leaders of research on learning and cognitive processes in institutional settings" (p. v). This paper considers Biggs's (2003) model of Three Levels of Teaching in relation to the theory and practice of teaching international students. Although Biggs's (2003) model is quite narrow in its interpretation of what constitutes good teaching, it is nevertheless critical in helping tease out important issues in relation to the place of ethnicity and culture in the classroom. Engagement with Biggs's (2003) work leads to the speculation that an important outcome of having culturally diverse classrooms in Australia is that not only might Australian lecturers become better at teaching culturally diverse students, but that they might become better teachers *for all students*, as well as cosmopolitan in their personal and professional outlooks. Part 1 of this paper outlines Biggs's (2003) Three Levels of Teaching. Part 2 sketches the main characteristics of what is reported in the literature as useful approaches to teaching international students. Part 3 of the paper describes a dilemma that appears to exist in relation to Biggs's (2003) Three Levels of Teaching and the guidance that is provided to lecturers in Part 2. Part 4 works through the dilemma.

PART 1: An overview of Biggs's (2003) Three Levels of Teaching

Figure 1 illustrates the fundamental characteristics of Biggs's (2003) Three Levels of Teaching. Level 1 is *teaching as assimilating*, Level 2 is *teaching as accommodating*, and Level 3 is *teaching as educating*.

At Level 1, students have to assimilate into the ways things are done in the host institution. In the classroom, the lecturer focuses on what the students *are* and stereotypes are a convenient way of interpreting their behaviour. For example, the views that students from some cultures and countries are rote learners, do not think critically, are passive and do not communicate in class, do not respond to progressive Western teaching methods, focus excessively on assessment, do not understand what plagiarism is, form ethnic enclaves, do not adjust to Australian academe easily, and consider lecturers to be gods

(Biggs, 2003, pp. 125-131). Biggs (2003) suggests that whilst some of these stereotypes are supported by evidence, others are also features of the local students and others still "are simply wrong" (p. 125). Level 1 teaching, for Biggs (2003), is the crudest of the teaching approaches and is a deficit model of education because it focuses on students' lack of knowledge and skills to work successfully in, for example, the Australian tertiary setting. Learning problems in Level 1 teaching are seen as student problems and are not attributed to teaching methods.

Rather than focusing on what students *are*, Level 2 teaching is instead concerned with what the lecturer *does* by accommodating to the cultural and educational contexts of the students' home countries. For example, when teaching international students they may choose to drop a "humorous interpersonal style" (Biggs, 2003, pp. 132-133) or modify their body language because it might be perceived to be inappropriate for some international students. Level 2 teaching "means adapting one's teaching towards meeting the preferred ways of ISs [international students]" (Biggs, 2003, p. 132). This resonates with the idea of a *grid multi-referential* approach to teaching which, according to Hudson and Morris (2003), is polycentric and international/global in its outlook (p. 66). A radical example of this is international students being taught and assessed in their preferred (including home) language by dual-language Australian lecturers whose pedagogy caters for the student's "cognitive styles" (Hudson & Morris, 2003, pp. 68).

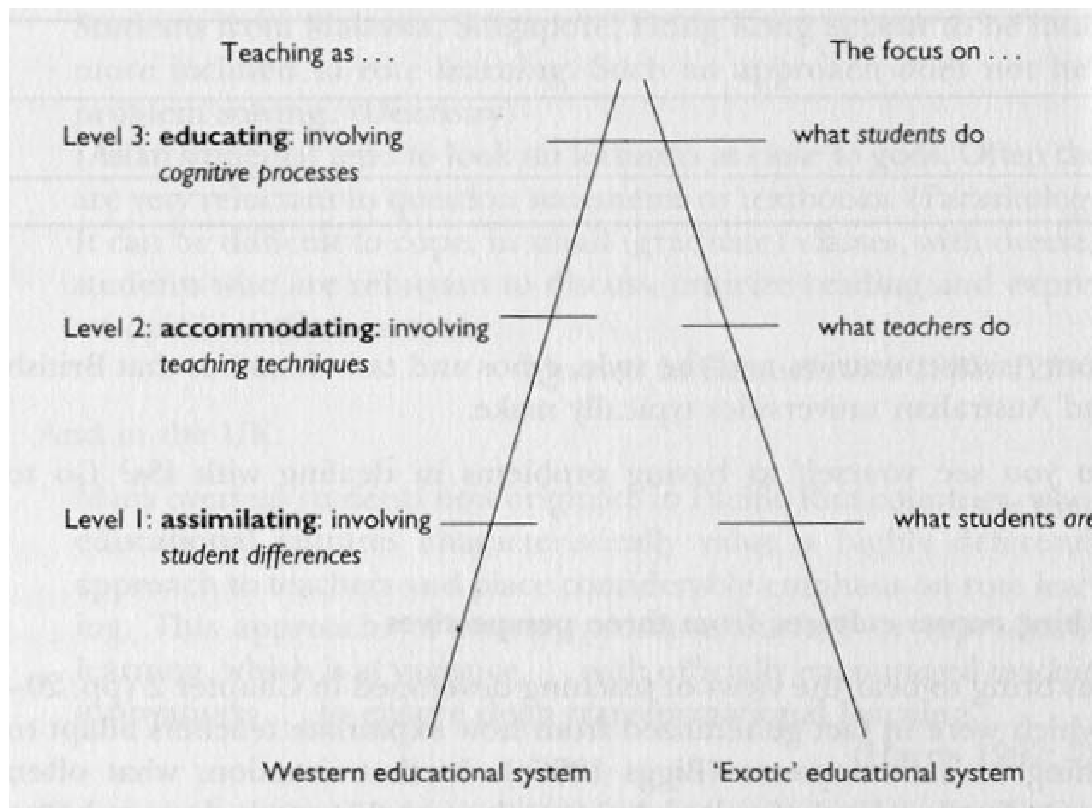

Figure 1 The focus in cross-cultural teaching (*Source*. Biggs, 2003, p. 124)

Biggs (2003) is a strong critic of radical multi-reference grid education and labels it as "impractical (and) quite absurd" (p. 138). Ballard and Clanchy (1997), too, comment that it is "not feasible nor desirable to alter your whole course structure" (p. 27) to accommodate international students who, themselves, are not homogenous. This is a particularly salient point. Biggs (2003), however, accepts that *minor* multi-reference grid accommodations can be made for international students. Even so, he viewed teaching strategies like speaking slowly, avoiding colloquialisms, and providing as much visual back-up to lectures as possible as "useful management tips but not about teaching itself" (Biggs, 2003, p. 133). It is tinkering around the edges of teaching. Level 2 *teaching as accommodating* remains a deficit model of education because the lecturer cannot be expected to have the range of teaching knowledge and skills to meet the needs of international students in the ways they are used to having their needs met (Biggs, 2003, p. 133). Any problem with student learning in an education setting that is driven by Level 2 teaching is, therefore, blamed on the lecturer.

Whilst Biggs (2003) believes that Level 1 and Level 2 teaching "cannot be justified empirically or in principle" (p. 138), he posits that Level 3 *teaching as educating* is inclusive because it focuses on what students *do*, rather than on what students *are* or what the lecturer *does*. Level 3 teaching is the most desirable form of teaching and it rests on the following propositions:

1. Persistent teaching problems lie not in the student but in the teaching.
2. In our teaching, we should focus on the similarities between students rather than on differences. Differences obviously exist, but to focus on them is counterproductive.
3. Accordingly, allowing for the needs of special groups, such as ISs [international students], is best done within the whole teaching system. (Biggs, 2003, pp. 138-139)

Biggs (2003) labels Level 3 teaching as "learning in context" (p. 136) and is directed at helping students develop the necessary skills and cognitive processes to meet the learning objectives of their studies. It is based on the universality of the learning process. Further, Level 3 teaching is predicated on the *ethnicity* of international students as being "beside the point" (Biggs, 2003, p. 134)[1]. As long as there is constructive alignment between the elements of curricula, Level 3 teaching can take place regardless of in which country and in which cultural context the teaching happens. It doesn't matter if the teaching is directed towards local or international students in local or international settings (for example, in Australia or Taiwan, Zimbabwe or Kazakhstan). If the curricula produce deep learning outcomes, then the cultural diversity present in the class is not an educational concern. Such a view might be said to effectively make the notion of

[1] Whilst Biggs (2003) does not define 'ethnicity' (or 'culture'), he talks of people from "African, Middle Eastern or Far Eastern countries" (p. 121). He also speaks of "Anglo-Celtic students" (p. 121) and "students from Confucian heritage cultures" (p. 125). Biggs (2003) also identifies countries with these descriptors. For example, students from the Far East come from China, Japan, and Korea (p. 128). Further, the sense in which Biggs (2003) uses 'culture' is 'the way we do things here' (wherever that may be).

internationalised teaching practice largely redundant. Put simply (and in the Biggsian[2] sense) good teaching will engage all students and help them learn what is worth learning.

To support his argument, Biggs (2003) drew on research which concluded that the main study-related difficulties reported by local *and* international university students in Australia were related to poor teaching, a mismatch between student and staff expectations, lack of access to staff, and heavy workloads (Mullins, as cited in Biggs, 2003, p. 137). For Biggs (2003), these findings indicate that the fundamental difficulties faced by international students are essentially the same as those faced by Australian students as they make the transition to study at the tertiary level. He does, however, make two concessions. One is that the *extent* of the challenges is likely to be greater for international students. The other is that language is a big issue for 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) students. These challenges notwithstanding, good teaching will, *ceteris paribus*, assist students to adapt and adjust to the demands of the local teaching and learning environment. For Biggs (2003), the key word is *transition* as the students move from one learning environment into another (and it is just as relevant to local students as it is to international students[3]).

PART 2: Other views on teaching international students

Now that Biggs's (2003) basic position has been outlined, it is worth briefly considering what advice is provided in the literature on teaching international students. Two themes are immediately apparent. One concerns support strategies which mostly address broader educational and institutional issues to do with understanding international students and providing a supportive university environment (see Table 1 for examples). Similar suggestions are mentioned by Ballard and Clanchy (1997), Kenyon and Amrapala (1991), and Mezger (1992)[4].

The second theme evident in the literature concerns specific *teaching strategies* for the classroom. Examples of these are displayed in Table 2 and are identified by Bretag, Horrocks, and Smith (2002) as being commonly-encountered recommendations for lecturers who teach international students, particularly those from EAL backgrounds.

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[2] Meyer (1998) introduced this term.

[3] Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2003) make the point that "local and international students do not arrive at university with a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking and the skills required to document evidence and argue issues" (p. 97). This is supported by Biggs (2003) who suggests that many local students find it difficult to bridge the academic cultures between high school and university (p. 121).

[4] The dated nature of some of these publications is both a reflection of their ongoing usefulness and also of the relative paucity of literature on the internationalisation *of university teaching* over the past 15 years. This is reflected in Lee's (2005) view that "the phenomenon of internationalisation of [Australian] higher education has remained largely un-researched in terms of either curriculum or pedagogy" (p. 42). Much of the engagement with internationalisation during this period has been at the level of universities *qua* organisations (see Knight, 1997, 1999, 2004; de Wit, 1997; Harman, 2005; Sanderson, 2006).

Table 1 *Examples of strategies for supporting international students*

Description of support strategy
Arrange specialist induction provision for international students
Produce clear information for international students
Help students from other countries to understand what is expected of them in assessment
Help international students to understand what is expected of them in seminars
Search for ways of lessening the isolation of international students
Be sensitive on issues of religion
Help students with special food requirements
Consider getting previous students from each country to write an introductory guide to local idiosyncrasies
Recognise cultural differences regarding attitudes to alcohol
Consider the special facilities needed by students from other countries
Consider the accommodation needs of students from other cultures
Offer language support at appropriate levels
Help international students communicate with home, especially in emergencies
Make arrangements to celebrate (for example, graduation either at home or abroad)

Note. Collated and adapted from text in Race (1999, pp. 42-44).

Table 2 *Examples of strategies for teaching international students*

Description of teaching strategy
Provide opportunities for international students to work with Australian students
Inculcate students into Australian academic culture
Establish names (including pronunciation) early in the semester
Provide assistance with discipline-specific vocabulary, and when necessary, Australian idiom, slang and cultural expressions
Provide opportunities for students to use their English writing skills for non-assessment tasks
Elicit responses, rather than just wait for them to be volunteered
Provide explicit expectations about assessment
Provide clear instructions for oral presentations
Provide opportunities for success. For example, allow students time to discuss issues in pairs or small groups before speaking to the whole group
Use a staged assessment schedule to enable students to build skills
Encourage students to take advantage of support services offered on campus
Provide ‘model’ answers that are easily accessible to all students
Provide opportunities for students to speak as an expert (for example, about their own culture or personal experiences)

Note. Tabulated from text in Bretag et al. (2002, pp. 59-61).

PART 3: A dilemma presents itself

The snapshot from the literature on teaching international students in the previous part of the paper is well-supported by the view of Prosser and Trigwell (1998) who maintain that "teaching with an awareness of cultural diversity is simply good teaching" (p. 170). Here, the idea of 'good teaching' takes students' cultures into consideration. For example, a lecturer at an Australian university might think that having a group of Malaysian students will require him or her to develop strategies to encourage them to speak up in class. Such a view might be based on their personal experience, the experience of others, or the belief that the culture-specific knowledge statement that in Malaysian schools "teachers initiate all communication in class" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 107) is a valid claim. Whilst such an approach seems prudent, Biggs (2003) counters it by exhorting lecturers to "*teach better*, and you'll address the problems presented by ISs [international students]" (p. 138, emphasis added). Biggs would say that the lecturer should be expected to have strategies to help *all students* speak up in class. It does not matter where the students come from.

The question has to be asked, then, of whether the views of Prosser and Trigwell (1998) and Biggs (2003) can be reconciled for, upon first inspection, they seem to be divergent pictures of good teaching. In one picture, culture is evident to the lecturer (in a different way than it is at Level 1 teaching) and this is promoted as good practice. The other picture, however, suggests that a focus on culture will muddy the waters and perhaps even locate the teaching approach in a deficit model of education. This is, *prima facie*, an interesting dilemma.

PART 4: Reflections on the place of culture in the classroom: a reconciliation

This part of the paper reflects on the main points made in Parts 1 and 2 and attempts to reconcile the dilemma presented in Part 3. Whilst the position taken by Biggs (2003) seems to fly in the face of widely-accepted theory that supports internationalised teaching practice, it is nevertheless based on a view of teaching that is student-centred and focuses not on what students *are* but what they *do* in the activities related to the teaching and learning arrangements. By the same token, the view of Prosser and Trigwell (1998) makes good sense because it highlights the value of lecturers knowing their students and, as a result, being able to assist them to meet the requirements of their studies. If being familiar with culture-specific knowledge gives the lecturer some advantage in knowing how some students might be assisted in certain situations, then all parties should benefit.

To begin with, the dilemma as stated in Part 3 of the paper does not concern Level 1 *teaching as assimilation*. Both Biggs (2003) and Prosser and Trigwell (1998) would argue that although culture is evident in the classroom in Level 1 teaching, it is not in a meaningful and positive way. Stereotypes are not useful for explaining or responding to student behaviour and this is made clear in the teaching and learning literature (for example, see Hofstede, 2001, p. 14; Cranton, 2001, p. 74; Reynolds & Skilbeck, 1976, p. 2; Kenyon & Amrapala, 1991, p. 3; Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p. 6; Khalidi, 1997, p. i; Race, 2001, p. 167; Mezger, 1992, p. 23; Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 258). At Level 1 teaching, culture is visible in the classroom through stereotypes. What is lacking is an understanding and an appreciation of culture.

Perhaps surprisingly, the dilemma does not concern Level 2 *teaching as accommodating* either, despite the inclination that this is where it would naturally seem to initially present itself. At this level, culture is apparent in the classroom but in a different way to how it is perceived in Level 1 teaching. At Level 2 teaching, lecturers accommodate to the cultural and educational contexts of the home countries of the international students. This implies that they have a degree of understanding of culture-specific knowledge. As mentioned, however, Biggs (2003) sees Level 2 teaching as nonsense because the lecturer cannot be expected to teach students in ways they have been taught in their home countries. Level 2 teaching corresponds with Winters's (n.d.) suggestion that to achieve success in the new, globalised world "thou shalt light a candle, burn incense, honor [*sic*] ancestors, cover your head, spin prayer wheels, kiss the dragon … do whatever it takes … have respect … and always cover all bases" (Eleven Commandments for International Communication Success, ¶ 11). The lecturer, however, does not need to become everything that *is* different when difference is present. This is impossible, let alone impractical and inauthentic. Level 2 teaching is indeed a deficit model of teaching. Further, it is not the sort of setting that Prosser and Trigwell (1998) refer to when they speak of good teaching and its relationship with culture.

The dilemma is situated at a point in-between Level 2 *teaching as accommodating* and Level 3 *teaching as educating*. This is a transition phase in-between the two levels[5]. Rather than the sorts of teaching strategies listed in Table 2 being about lecturers accommodating to the cultural and educational contexts of international students, they are more about assisting them to *adapt* or *adjust* to the new academic environment. They are about helping students make the transition to, for example, Australian academe. They are not about trying to teach international students using approaches found in their home countries. Biggs (2003) should have no qualm with this, for it is about what the lecturer *does* in response to what students *do* (and not *are*). It is about student-centred learning; helping students to both adjust and be transformed by the educational experience[6].

Further, Biggs's (2003) claim that teaching and support strategies specifically directed at assisting international students are "useful management tips" (p. 133) for teaching but "not about teaching itself" (p. 133) can be challenged. Whilst the suggestions outlined in Table 1 might well fall in line with Biggs's (2003) claim, the same cannot be said for the teaching strategies outlined in Table 2. Not only are they manifestations of curriculum process and context but *they are universal* in the sense that their use will benefit Australian students as well. Whilst Bretag et al. (2002) focus on the use of the sorts of strategies outlined in Table 2 to support EAL international students, it is clear that they would also be relevant to international students whose first language is English. In fact, they are also appropriate for Australian students, regardless of whether or not English is their first language. For example, encouraging students to take advantage of support services offered on campus is good for all students. So is providing students with model answers to sample academic questions. So, too, is explaining discipline-specific

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[5] The idea of moving from one level to another by gradations has merit. For example, lecturers are not at Level 2 one day and at Level 3 the next.

[6] As suggested by Kalantzis and Cope (2000), "students do not go to university to stay the same" (p. 46).

vocabulary, eliciting responses from students and providing them with clear, written instructions for oral presentations. All such teaching strategies can assist *all* students in the classroom regardless of their cultural background. Whether or not the lecturer actually *realises* this is another matter (and this is perhaps the point of distinction as to whether or not they are at Level 3 teaching).

The universal nature of the sorts of strategies outlined in Table 2 reflects the advice given lecturers by Ryan and Hellmundt (2003) who suggest that "such strategies will be of benefit not only to international students but also all learners in a diverse learning environment" (p. 1). Cannon and Newble (2000), too, support this view (p. 149) as do Exley and Dennick (2004), and Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000). Essentially, it describes a student-centred approach to teaching where, whilst learners are ultimately responsible for their own learning, lecturers can assist students from a diversity of backgrounds to make the connections necessary to bring about meaningful learning outcomes (Fraser, 1996). In other words, it is about the better teaching that is encouraged by Biggs (2003) rather than with tinkering around its edges.

Accordingly, using the sorts of teaching strategies outlined in Table 2 does not necessarily have to be seen as belonging to a deficit model of education in the sense of deficit as portrayed by Biggs (2003). If the lecturer uses particular teaching strategies to help students make the transition to the their new tertiary environment rather than using them as 'Level 2 minor multi-reference grid curricula adjustments' solely for EAL international students, then deficit does not belong to the lecturers. It belongs to the students and it simply recognises the gap that has to be bridged between their prior and present educational settings. Importantly, it does not suggest that the education systems from which students come are inherently deficient or weak. Nor does it suggest that the students are incapable of making the transition to meeting the requirements of the new education setting.

Thus far, it has been established that teaching with an awareness of culture (in a positive fashion) does not have to be relegated to the dustbin of deficit models of teaching. It can be at a point in-between Level 2 teaching and Level 3 teaching. It has also been suggested that lecturers who use teaching strategies like those presented in Table 2 could be doing so either with or without awareness that they are actually universal strategies. Whilst the former sits nicely with Biggs's (2003) Level 3 *teaching as educating* it is perhaps worth reflecting that any educational theory that holds that culture can be made invisible in a classroom characterised by significant cultural, language, and educational diversity would appear to be on shaky ground. It could be accused of having a rather blinkered interpretation of teaching and education (which seems odd, given that 'universal' suggests 'all encompassing'). To this suggestion, Biggs would probably comment that whilst the interpretation may be strict, it is necessary to get to the heart of fundamental education principles. Further, given that it is all about universal teaching practice, focusing on notions such as culture, age, gender, and socio-economic background of students will just add clutter to the points Biggs (2003) is trying to get across. It is important to note that Biggs (2003) is not suggesting that 'culture' is a negative or worthless concept. There is simply no need to engage with it *from a teaching*

point of view in an education setting based on universal teaching principles. The important question to ask here, of course, is what is meant by the word *teaching*? How narrow or broad should its interpretation be?

Whilst both Biggs's (2003) Level 3 teaching and the view of Prosser and Trigwell (1998) seem to go their separate ways in relation to culture in the classroom, there is an opportunity for reconciliation that respects both positions. Indeed, the reconciliation suggests that the views of Biggs (2003) and Prosser and Trigwell (1998) are actually complementary. The reconciliation is that the lecturer should recognise and respect all cultures in the classroom and be committed to helping all students meet the learning objectives of their studies. This includes the use of whatever universal teaching strategies and support initiatives are necessary to assist all students in this regard. This recognises both the uniqueness of the students as cultural and social beings and also the commitment of the lecturer to help all students develop so they can meet the learning objectives of their studies. This view is based on sound educational theory and respect for cultural difference. It means that the better teaching that Biggs (2003) called for is a worthy pursuit, as is the claim by Prosser and Trigwell (1998) that teaching with an awareness of cultural diversity is simply good teaching. Paradoxically, the reconciliation simultaneously dismisses and reconstitutes internationalised teaching practice. The lecturer is free to concentrate on helping students realise the learning objectives of their studies in a supportive, intercultural educational environment that respects cultural, language, and educational diversity. Note that this preserves Biggs's (2003) narrow interpretation of teaching whilst situating it in a broader educational setting which values culture as an integral feature of the social educative process.

Although Biggs's (2003) notion that "ethnicity is beside the point" (p. 134) when teaching international students is challenging upon first inspection, perhaps it is closer to good internationalised teaching practice than it seems. Given that the teaching strategies listed in Table 2 are universal, then a lecturer who utilises them and is also able to appreciate and be comfortable with cultural difference may simply look past or beyond such differences in the student group and treat each person as an individual with specific learning needs. Paradoxically, the more internationalised the lecturer becomes in this sense, the less internationalisation means as a point of distinction. The borders that are inferred by the word *international* are dissolved to become universal. The challenge, nevertheless, is how a lecturer might develop such a cosmopolitan attitude where cultural difference is no longer a focus in the universal educative process. Is this achievable?

A final observation is that Level 3 teaching also infers assimilation into the local teaching and learning framework. Whilst the classroom may be characterised by cultural, language, and educational diversity, this is not what drives the educative process. Rather, it is driven by the host culture. To this, Biggs might comment that there is nothing inherently negative about international students engaging with host country curricula to achieve rich learning outcomes as long as the curricula are constructively aligned (internally consistent and valid) and the classroom environment is respectful and appreciative of the uniqueness of each individual, both teachers and students, in the

educative process. This leaves aside, of course, considerations to do with hegemony, neo-liberalism, and neo-imperialism as undercurrents of contemporary global processes.

Conclusion

This paper has considered Biggs's (2003) model of Three Levels of Teaching in relation to teaching international students. A summary has been provided of Biggs's (2003) position as well as an outline of themes commonly encountered in the literature on what constitutes good practice when teaching international students. There has also been some deliberation on the dilemma that was precipitated by two seemingly divergent views of what is important to consider when teaching international students. It has been suggested that the sorts of teaching strategies listed in Table 2 are universal. Further, if a lecturer uses them to help international students make the transition to the local education setting, then this is not Level 2 teaching. The only question that then remains is if the lecturer realises such strategies are universal or if they use them specifically for international students. In the case of the former, this could well constitute Level 3 teaching. In the case of the latter, the lecturer is still responding to culture in the classroom in terms of doing things for 'that group' of students from 'that culture'. Level 3 teaching, in contrast, implies an entirely different view of culture which is mediated through the lecturer having developed a sophisticated cosmopolitan outlook. To end, the complimentary nature of the views of Biggs (2003) and Prosser and Trigwell (1998) is expressed well by Cannon and Newble (2000) who suggest that the usual principles of good teaching apply to international students as they do for other groups of students, but the lecturer needs to acknowledge and respond to their specific needs (p. 149), just as they need to respond to the learning needs of *all* students in an increasingly diverse student body (p. 147).

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