Navigating Cross-cultural Classroom Dynamics

JODY GABLER: So once again, our workshop today is Navigating Cross-Cultural Classroom Dynamics. We're going to be talking a lot about different cultural elements that you may encounter here at Cornell. And I'm going to introduce us today. So I'm Jody Gabler.

ALICE WU: And I'm Alice Wu. And we both teach in the International TA Program at Cornell, which is part of the Center for Teaching Innovation. And we're very happy to see you all today. So now, we're going to talk about what we'll be discussing today. Here's our agenda. So first, we'll be talking about Cornell's multicultural climate. It's a very diverse and interesting environment. And then we'll be talking about elements of culture in the classroom. And we'll have some examples of cultural values. And then we'll talk about some classroom scenarios. And in that case, you'll be able to discuss these yourself in small groups and think about how these might be related to the cultural values. And then finally, we'll have some conclusions about coming to a new place. So yeah, that's pretty much our agenda. And we're excited to hear what you have to say about the different topics.

JODY GABLER: Definitely. So let's first take a look at Cornell's multicultural climate. So I know when I first started working at Cornell, this was one of the things I was the most excited about, was the fact that Cornell brings together so many different people from so many different places. So we wanted to start by just giving you a little sense of the extent of that. So this is Cornell's motto. Ezra Cornell was the founder of Cornell. And his kind of really famous saying was, "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." How many of you have seen this quote or heard this quote before? Is this something that you're familiar with? You can raise your real hand, or you can use the little emojis to raise your digital hand. A few people. Wonderful Yeah, so you'll definitely see this when you come to Cornell. You'll hear this. You'll see it. This is a sculpture that I think is in one of the libraries. I'm not sure. But you'll see this and hear this a lot at Cornell. So right from its inception, Cornell was paying attention to the fact that we wanted to bring any person, bring different people together, to study at Cornell. I'm sure. Ezra Cornell's perception of what it meant to be multicultural and diverse was a little different than how we think of it today. But it was still there right from the beginning. In 2019, Cornell adopted a set of core values, where Cornell really started to think about, who are we as a community? What do we value? What do we want to be like as an institution? And as you can see, one of those values was a community of belonging. So some of these are more academically oriented, like purposeful discovery, free and open inquiry and expression, exploration across boundaries. But then others are more focused on the people in the community, like a community of belonging, changing lives through

public engagement, and finally, respect for the natural environment. So as we dig into this community of belonging, this is kind of how it was explained when they really wrote out those core values. "We value diversity and inclusion, and we strive to be a welcoming, caring, and equitable community where students, faculty, and staff with different backgrounds, perspectives, abilities, and experiences can learn, innovate, and work in an environment of respect and feel empowered to engage in any community conversation." So I think this is a pretty powerful statement that Cornell put out, really, really telling the world, hey, we care about bringing different people together and interacting together. To give you a couple of statistics, this is from Cornell's Diversity Dashboard. So this is some statistics that are collected and gathered every year and published for the community to see. I believe these are a couple of years old. I don't know exactly what year, but within the last five years. So as you take a look, the data goes across like this. So this top row is undergraduate students. And then this second row here is graduate students. Next, is postdocs. And then finally at the bottom is the faculty. So taking a look, this shows us-- let's look at the graduate and professional students row. Within this class, we had about half female, half male. The first four colored boxes here, these are numbers of students from the United States. But they're broken down by different backgrounds. So we have 26% white students. 11% were Asian or Asian-white, 11% Black, Hispanic and/or Indigenous, 4% unknown or they didn't disclose on their materials. And then 48% of the graduate students were international students. And this includes all countries outside of the United States. So that's a pretty large percentage. Almost half of the students in the graduate population were from other countries, other than the United States. So within the grad students, it's an extremely diverse population. And even within the American grad students, we also see a real nice amount of diversity. So the breaking down the numbers, last year, in 2023, Cornell had 6,745 international students, almost 7,000 international students here on campus. And those students represented 130 different countries. So as we've seen, Cornell is a very diverse place. The people here on campus come from a wide variety of backgrounds. And with that, we have a lot of different cultures and ways of being, interacting with one another every day here on campus. So before we dive into some of the specifics of that, we wanted you to think about what might that mean for a graduate student's experience here at Cornell? If you're joining us in this really multicultural setting, how might that impact your classroom experience and other interactions that you might have with people on campus? So we'd like to do a quick think and write. We're going to give you about one minute to think about this question and put your ideas in the chat. There's no right or wrong answer here. Whatever comes to mind is perfectly fine. So think about how this cultural backgrounds might impact your experience. Put your answer in the chat, but don't hit Send yet. And then in about one minute, we'll all hit Send together, and we'll see what ideas people have generated. So go ahead and take just a minute to type, and then I'll let when to hit the little arrow to send it. We're seeing some ideas about how it enriches the class discussion, challenges each other. We're expanding horizons, getting new perspectives and point of view, opportunities to learn about other cultures and backgrounds. I like this one, different ways of collaborating in a group, for sure, for sure. People do that very differently. Many languages spoken. Yes, Cornell has so many wonderful languages spoken here. Bringing diverse perspectives. Misunderstandings,

yes. Misunderstandings happen all the time. That's a normal part of bringing so many people together. Thank you for acknowledging that. More about different perspectives. Hesitation? Yeah. Anxiety and curiosity. It can be uncomfortable at times to maybe not have everybody following the same rules or norms that you have known all your life, so for sure. Diverse perspectives with integrity. I like that, integrity. Yeah, wonderful responses. So I'm going to turn it over to Alice at this point, and she'll give you a little bit more information about some of the cultural elements.

ALICE WU: So has anyone ever seen an iceberg? Yeah? Where was your iceberg, Felix?

FELIX: I just remember seeing this kind of chart, but nothing specific comes to mind just yet.

ALICE WU: That's great, though. Anyone else ever see an iceberg? Anyone ever go to Alaska, Greenland, Norway? So a lot of times people like to talk about culture as an iceberg because similarly as a real iceberg in the ocean, you can see the top part of the iceberg, which is visible. But then there's a lot of iceberg underneath the water. And you actually don't know how much there is. So when ships go through that water, they have to be really careful not to hit the bottom of the iceberg because it's hard to see it. So similarly to icebergs, culture has some parts that are very visible. So those are what kind of things do you think might be visible in culture. Anybody have any ideas about that? So things like music, or language, or dress, or food, festivals, celebrations, holidays, all of these are very visible things and people can say, oh yeah, that's that kind of culture. But what people don't see is the things that are underneath the surface, which are how do you treat people, for example, if they're a different age or a different gender? Or how do you deal with time? How on time do you have to be? What time do you go to a party if it's 8 o'clock? Do you get there at 7 o'clock? 10 o'clock? 12 o'clock? So that can be really different. How close in terms of your space do you stay to other people, or how far away should you be? What kind of cultural values do you have? And these are things that are not visible to other people, and they're not obvious also. So I see some of you are in anthropology or talked about indirect and direct communication, all these different things, which is great and understanding different perspectives. So that's a lot of what is going on with this cultural iceberg, is trying to figure out what the other perspectives are from the other countries. So, for example, one example of how you treat someone who's a different age is something that I experienced when I was a student studying in Sweden when I was in my 20s, so the age of you all. And I was having dinner with a Swedish friend with some other Swedish young people in his apartment. And then his two aunts unexpectedly came to the door and knocked on the door. And so he said, come in. And the door wasn't locked. So they walked in. And he said, hi, Hannah. Hi, Maria. Come on in. Are you hungry? If you want to eat, we have more chairs in the kitchen. You can go get one. And he didn't get up. And he didn't stop eating. And he didn't get them a chair. And he addressed them by their first names. And they were 40 or 50. And we were 25 or something. And so I was kind of shocked, actually, because I was brought up by one parent who came from China and the other one, who, her parents came from China. Both of my parents have Chinese backgrounds. So

if it were me, I would get up, say, hello, Aunties. Can I get you a chair? Would you like to join us for dinner? So nice to see you. So I would be acting really differently. So I was really surprised and kind of shocked. But what I noticed, which was really interesting, was his two aunts were perfectly happy and they went and got chairs, and they brought them up to the table, and they sat down, and they ate dinner with us. So I learned something really important from that, and that just because I thought that certain behavior should happen in a certain situation did not mean that the people in that country thought the same thing. And in fact, they didn't at all. So they had a very different idea of how you treat someone according to if they have an age difference or not. And they were fine with that, which I thought was really interesting. So that was a good lesson for me to learn. And this actually ties in pretty well to our next slide, which is the sort of a cultural values continuum. So there are a couple of interculturalists, very well known interculturalists. One is named Edward T Hall. And one is named Gerte Hofstede. And they thought of a bunch of values that could be different in different countries. And so these are pairs of values that are contrasting with each other, and they're all in a continuum. So someone isn't necessarily totally egalitarian or totally hierarchical. They could be somewhere, anywhere on the continuum. And so they thought of a lot of values. But Jody and I just picked a few that we thought were more relevant to the educational context, so in terms of egalitarian and hierarchical, low context, high context, individualistic, collectivistic, surfacing differences, maintaining harmony, task focused, relationship focused. These are all pairs of contrasting values. And cultural values help people in a culture to know how to behave, how to interact with people, what things are important, what things they should do when they encounter different situations. But when you go to another culture, a lot of times those are going to be different. So then that sort of inserts an element of surprise and sometimes it's like a shock to me, like with my friend and his aunts, and sometimes it's really interesting, like that's so interesting they do that. But in any case, there can be a real sort of continuum of how people react to things. So if we look at these individually, briefly, in the next slide, egalitarian versus hierarchical, so egalitarian is everybody should be treated the same regardless of their position. Hierarchical is people should be treated differently depending on their title, position, and rank. So my parents' Chinese culture was more hierarchical in terms of age. Treat older people with more respect, more deference, call them by a title. Stand up when you see them. Be more formal, whereas the Swedish culture was more egalitarian. Hi. Here's my aunt. I'll call her by her first name. She can get her own chair. I'm very happy to see her. She can eat dinner with me. So this is like a range of behaviors, and then people could fall in between. The next one is low context, high context. So when information is presented, I prefer that every detail is spelled out clearly, compared to high context. Some information is understood by everyone, so it's not necessary to spell it out. So in the United States, it's a very diverse culture. People come from all different places, all different backgrounds. The school systems in different states, even different cities sometimes are really different, but especially different states. So we can't assume a lot of shared background. So a lot of times, because of that, people here tend to say things more clearly, with more details, more specifically. If they explain something, if they give feedback about something, they tend to give more details. In countries that are more high

context, which have more similarity, or more sort of a monocultural place where people have a standardized school system, there's a more similar culture, they assume that everyone knows certain things, so they don't need to say everything because everybody knows that. And so they may explain things with less detail because people know it, so why should you say all of that? And also they may give feedback with less specificity. So one example of this would be if you're teaching in a class and you explain things, you may want to explain with more detail than you think you might need to because some of your students have different backgrounds than other ones. And it's probably helpful to not say, as everybody knows, or as everyone learned in high school, because they may not have learned that, depending on their school or depending on what their background was. So it's always good to maybe explain a little bit more than you need to. And if they know, then they'll let you know that. But it's helpful because people come from such different backgrounds here. Even at Cornell, people have such different high schools. So that's something helpful in terms of the classroom context and in terms of the-- sorry. Can we go back for a minute, Jody, to the egalitarian one? So in terms of the classroom and egalitarian hierarchical, so when you come to Cornell, how many people right now call their professors by their last name or title and last name? Yeah. Yeah. Good. And how many people call their professors by their first name? Anybody? No. So when you come to Cornell, you may encounter quite a variety. Some professors will say, hi, nice to meet you. Call me Bob. Or some may say, hi, I'm Professor So-and-so. I'm Dr. So-and-so. So it can be really different, just like the students are different. The professors are different. Jody and I have discussed how we both needed to figure out when we went to grad school what to call our professors because if you're in undergrad in the United States, I don't think you ever call your professor by their first name, but if-- or rarely, maybe some people who are more informal, but I never called anyone by their first name. But when we went to grad school, the chair of our department said, call me Sally. And another professor who was on my committee, he said, Hi, I'm Professor Noblitt. And another lady who was older, very formal, had white hair, and was not a professor, her name was Marilyn. But I could never call her Marilyn. I would say, excuse me, because I couldn't call her anything. I couldn't call her professor. She wasn't a professor. I didn't want to call her Ms. because that was sort of weird. And I couldn't call her Marilyn because it was-- she was too formal. So I just called her, excuse me, I have a question. Anyway, so you may find that when you come to Cornell, that might be something that you want to think about. And if in doubt, it's always good to start more formal and say, hello, Professor So-and-so. And then they'll say, just call me Bob. And then you can do that. But I wouldn't start out with hey, Bob, because they might be the kind that don't want to be called Bob. So that's something else to think about. So now we can go to the third one, I guess, Jody, individualistic and collectivistic. Yeah, because we did the second one already. So in this one, it's I prefer to work independently and be recognized individually. The other one is I prefer to work as a group and think it's better when individuals are not singled out. So the United States tends to be somewhat individualistic. People think a lot about their own background, their own interests, their own ambitions, their own needs. And so when they make decisions, a lot of times it's based on them, what's good for that person themselves. In some other countries, people tend to think of themselves as part of a group, part of their family, part of their class, part of their

company, part of their society. So when they make decisions, it's not just what's best for me personally, it's what's best for me and my family, me and my classmates, me and my group. So they're more likely to make decisions based on the whole group. And again, neither is better or worse. It's just that this is a different way of thinking. So at Cornell, as you may know, many classes are graded on a curve, like a bell curve, which means not everybody gets an A. And so Cornell students are very concerned about their grades. And so you may find that some students seem a little bit competitive, or you also may find that if you're a TA, many students may come and ask you for a higher grade on their homework or on their test. They'll ask for, can I get another quarter of a point on this? Can I get another half a point on that? Because they want to have a better grade, so they have a better GPA, so they can get into medical school. So this can be something that is different than the society that you might be coming from, in terms of the classroom or just in general. And our next slide is surfacing differences versus maintaining harmony. I directly address issues when there's an issue, differences when there's issues, so the problem can be solved quickly, versus I prefer to deal with differences indirectly, behind the scenes to avoid causing upset. So a lot of people here tend to, if there's an issue, they just directly talk about it with that person in a calm way, hopefully, and then try to just solve it right away, and then it's done, whereas in some other places where harmony and saving everyone's face is more important, sometimes people don't want to talk to someone directly. They don't want to create a conflict. They don't want to embarrass anyone or themselves. So they might ask maybe a third person to talk to that other person and maybe help to solve the conflict. And so this can be a way that everybody feels comfortable without having anyone lose face. So in terms of being a TA, for example, you have a problematic student in some way. Maybe they have some kind of little behavioral issue, which hopefully they wouldn't, but occasionally they do, you might want to talk to them after class, rather than in front of the class. It's easier for them and for you. So that would be like surfacing differences, versus maintaining harmony. Probably it would be easier for you and the student to talk about it in a way that maintains harmony by not doing it in front of the class. And we have one more, which is task focused and relationship focused. So when working on a project, I prefer to focus on getting the job done and become impatient with socializing, compared to when working on a project, I value time spent in building relationships and work better with people when I get to know them. And then there's a continuum of all the way from one side to the other. So some people from some cultures, or some personalities, or some fields, they prefer to work on the job and just focus on that and not really talk to people too much or maybe even work on it by themselves, whereas other people, they want to build a relationship with someone that they have to work with. In some countries, people have to have some kind of social interactions, and build trust, and build a relationship, and get to know each other before they consider doing business with each other. So sometimes this has implications for international business or collaboration that you have to know that there are some differences between how much someone thinks they need to get to know you before they want to work with you or before they feel comfortable working with you. Or maybe, on the other hand, they don't want to and they think it's not necessary. So when you're interacting with professors or colleagues at Cornell, you may find that some of them want to get to

know you and ask you a lot of stuff about yourself and your background and your interests and so forth. And some of them might not. And they just want to focus on the task. So that might be a variation that you'll see. And there can be all different variations of how this can work. So in the next slide, in terms of cultural values, as we've said before, there isn't one right way. It isn't like its right, or its wrong, or its better, or its worse. It's just different. So depending on someone's culture, background, personality, et cetera, they might act in a different way. And it might be different than what you're used to, or it might be similar, depending on their background and your background. But it's interesting to think about how they're reacting and notice what kind of actions they have compared to what you would think and also to just know that for them, that's not a right or a wrong way, even if for you it might not be expected. Yeah. So now, we're going to have a chance to do some-- you guys are going to be able to think about this in more detail. And Jody is going to tell you about that.

JODY GABLER: Thanks. Sorry, I lost my audio button for a minute. So yeah, we had a lot of different interesting examples of ways to think about culture. Maybe some of these you've thought a lot about before, and maybe some of them are something that you hadn't considered before. So we'd like to give you a little bit of time in a small group. We're going to put you in just a minute into groups of about three or four people. And in your groups, we'd like you to be able to talk through this. We're going to give you, again, those continua, the two different ends of the spectrum, and you can have a chance to talk about it with your group. You can decide how much detail you want to reveal about yourself. If you feel comfortable giving personal examples, that's wonderful. And if you don't, that's OK too. You can definitely talk more generally. So we're going to give you those cultural elements. And then we have four scenarios for you, also in your groups, to talk through. And you can think about, if this were me in this situation, what would I do? What would I say? And maybe also, what's going on here? Is there something cultural happening under the surface that it might be good to be aware of? So let me show you. I'm going to stop sharing this for a second. And I'm going to show you what that'll look like. And then I'll go ahead and give you the link to do this in your breakout room. Can you see this new-- let me move it over. Sorry about that. Can everybody see the new slide with the yellow? Yeah? Great. So when you go into your breakout rooms, I'm going to give you a link to this document. And with your group, again, these are the instructions. So you're going to discuss the cultural elements from slides 2 and 3. So that'll be this and this. These are the same as what Alice just went through. And then on slide 4 here, there's four scenarios. So with your group, you can read through those and talk about how you would react in that situation. Every breakout room will have a number. You'll be in breakout room one or breakout room two. So as you're discussing, find the slide also with your breakout room number. And you can add notes to the document to keep track a little bit of what you talked about. That way when we come back together into the larger room, we'll have a few things to look at. Are there any questions about what you should do in your breakout room? No? So I'm going to give you the link here. I'm going to give you the link in the chat for this document. And then we'll put you into breakout rooms.