

# Decentering Discourses of American Identity: Internationalizing the Classroom as a Necessary Act of Critical Distancing in DEI

Written by Dr. Christopher J. Finlay

*“But, professor, I’ve never been encouraged to share how I see things before. I’ve wanted to, but I haven’t felt comfortable.”* - International LMU Student

In my global communication class, called *Wires & Empires*, we routinely discuss how publicly-funded, government produced media, from the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe to TV Marti and Alhurra, is a vital arm of American soft power. American students are routinely shocked to find out their government is in the media business. They are excited to explore and problematize the U.S. Agency for Global Media’s mission, particularly as it relates to domestic interpretations of the First Amendment. But, they rarely get the chance to learn first-hand how international audiences negotiate their readings of this media content. So, when I first learned one of my students this semester had been raised on a steady diet of this content, I jumped at the chance to ask them to share their impressions. I later felt insecure about this choice. Had I marked their difference to publicly? Did they feel pressured to share? Did they feel as though I had asked them to speak for an entire population?

During an office hours meeting with the student, I asked if I had overstepped and I offered an apology. The student immediately took issue with my apology, explaining how they sometimes felt their experiences and perspectives were not valued. They worried they might be met with confusion or even hostility, especially when they didn’t align with American assumptions about how to categorize and define identity. It wasn’t that the student was ever told that their identities and experiences weren’t valued, it was that lectures, largely Western course readings and in-class conversations appeared to shut down opportunities for sharing.

How is it, I wondered, that in this moment, when our society’s institutions are critically engaged with painful questions about injustices borne from indices of identity, that this student came to internalize a message that insights derived from their positionality were not valued?

Scholars in the growing body of literature on intersectionality tell us that identity manifests differently for everyone. At the same time, out of a desire to address historical inequities, the American academy is working to implement changes to curricula in the name of diversity, equality and inclusion. A necessary first step in this work is to outline the manifestations and contours of inequalities. While this work is essential, it requires extraordinary nuance and humility or it risks, despite its laudable goal of grappling with systemic biases and identity-based violence in American history, reifying specific constructions of identity.

So, how do we avoid empowering that which we hope to overcome? This process is exceedingly difficult even in the most intellectually sophisticated conversations. In the classroom, where students are often first introduced to this work, the task can sometimes seem impossible. Indeed, I increasingly fear that in the name of DEI, we risk drafting students into what might almost be called a new form of American imperialism. Our students, who are deeply committed to social justice, are anxious to rectify the inequalities *they see*. And, therein lies the problem.

Without a careful grounding in more intentional approaches to diverse global histories, I worry that the essential work of DEI risks becoming an ethnocentric exercise in American hubris.

I believe internationalizing our classes may offer at least a partial solution to this conundrum. It allows us to imagine diversity, equality, inclusion, and access from both inside and outside the confines of American structures. This decentering can be liberatory, but it is also difficult. Personally, I believe adopting an agonistic approach to the art of education can be powerful. But this sort of productive insecurity does require accepting a certain amount of vulnerability and risk.

For instance, I often find myself asking whether the difficult but necessary classroom conversations about ethnicity that so many of us are engaged in focus too narrowly on familiar inequalities. If this is the case, are we collaborating in the erasure of less familiar or unseen identities? Similarly, if we are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with questions raised by work in comparative global racializations, do we run the risk of devaluing or even silencing lived experiences that do not fit more recognizable US Census constructions of race?

By the same token, if we encourage comparative global approaches to identity, do we run the risk of inadvertently devaluing the historical and ongoing power of American and colonial constructions of identity? Do we risk downplaying the significant impact these constructions continue to have on the lived experiences of students? The answer, I believe, can be either yes or no. If we don't develop approaches that are sensitive to every student's positionality, we risk diluting internationalization into crude cultural relativism. On the other hand, if we approach internationalization more as an invitation for students to view their own intersectional positionalities within global flows of cultures, histories, ideologies and economies, I believe we can spark powerful awakenings.

In my experience, when students realize seemingly timeless hegemonic identity constructs are in fact local reflections of particular moments in history, they become empowered to begin journeys to more fully imagining themselves as in negotiation with ascribed identity constructs. In this way, an internationalized curriculum can become a tool of liberation.

What does all of this look like in practice? How do we translate intention into pedagogical practice? I will be honest, I am still learning. And, I hope that if I am to stay true to the global pedagogical philosophy I've tried to outline in this short essay, I will always tell people I am still learning.

But, I know this much. It starts with being vulnerable. In my classes, I find sharing details about my own positionality as an international scholar can be helpful. I try to explain how, as a Canadian, I've been blessed with a certain amount of critical distance from American history and paradigms. This critical distance isn't simply an affectation. By virtue of where I spent my formative years, I cannot help but view my adopted homeland from a comparative perspective. I simply don't have a choice. At the same time, I realize I can never fully understand the positionalities of my American students. And, I tell them this. I invite them to teach me. I do the same thing with my global students. They are experts where I am not. I routinely ask them, with humility, to share insights from their own intersectional experiences. By doing this, I hope to model what I believe to be the ethos of internationalizing pedagogy: collaboration, generosity and curiosity.

This essay, like the process of internationalizing the curriculum itself, isn't particularly prescriptive. It is more about asking questions. And, while it may be imperfect, I hope you will agree that it is a start. If you are interested in joining colleagues from the CTE and the Office of Global-Local Initiatives to explore how internationalizing pedagogy can support DEI and Anti-Racism in the classroom, we are planning on holding informal gatherings this year to invite curious and generous conversations as well as opportunities for collaboration.

---

### **Dr. Christopher J. Finlay**

Dr. Christopher J. Finlay is Associate Chair and Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Loyola Marymount University. He holds a PhD in Communication from the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania. He specializes in digital media cultures, sports communication, global media industries and political communication. He has a particular interest in Olympics media, global digital media policy and Chinese media industries.



Dr. Finlay has authored over a dozen scholarly works, including, most recently, "Real Men, Himbos, And Bros: Continuity And Change In The Portrayal Of Masculinities In Sport-Dirtied Beer Advertising" with Dr. Lawrence Wenner, "The Right to Profitable Speech: Olympians, Sponsorship, and Social Media Discourse" and "Building a Better Winter Dream: Beijing 2022 and the International Olympic Committee". In addition, Chris regularly contributes to popular media through expert commentary and original think pieces. His most recent is "Powering Down" for LMU Magazine.