# Introduction to Academic Culture

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Every work and learning place has a *culture.* This culture includes common practices, how work is done, and how people interact. Although all places of work and learning in Canada must follow Canadian Labour Laws and Human Rights Laws, different places of work and learning attract different kinds of people, and they have different expectations for the members of their work or learning environment. Take the issue of time, for example. Long distance truckers may think they are “on time” if they arrive within a few hours of their targeted time goal. By contrast, an airplane flight crew is expected to arrive exactly on time for their flight.

People who have worked or studied within one particular culture for a long time may forget that others may do things differently, and they may think their way of doing things is just commonsense. But if a person is new to a place of work or study, it is often difficult to determine how to do things when one is overwhelmed with so many new skills and tasks to learn.

In a learning environment, there are also many points to be aware of when trying to understand the culture. According to Carleton College, values that “influence the classroom, professors’ expectations... are as follows: time orientation, work and achievement orientation, direct communication, critical thinking and problem solving style... [and] pragmatism” (Carleton College, 2008).

**Time Management** Professors, their assistants, and other students, value good time management, that is, where a student maximizes the use of his/her time. This is necessary because there is so much to do: study, research and write papers, attend lectures and labs, and meet with study groups. And all of this is done without attendance being taken or a supervising teacher; a student must therefore find strategies to get everything done in the most efficient manner and have the discipline to adhere to a self-imposed rigorous schedule. Naturally, this also means that a strong work ethic and high marks are valued at the university level.

**Direct communication** is important in most places of business and education in Canada. A supervisor expects his/her employee to come to him/her with suggestions or problems before going “over his/her head” and contacting the supervisor’s supervisor. In an educational setting it is the same: a professor expects to hear about a problem before the department head hears about it. That way the professor has a chance to address the problem him or herself. In most cases, the student will be asked if the professor has been made aware of the problem, and may ask the student to talk to the professor before the department head is willing to get involved. Canadians see this as respecting the professor or supervisor, by giving him/her an opportunity to sort things out before having to step into the situation.

It is very important to have good relationships with people outside your cultural group when on campus. If your circle of friends includes people who are not of your culture, your awareness and understanding of yourself and others will be strengthened, as well as your access to information and social activities being increased. According to Leonard (2011) of the magazine, *Canadian Newcomer*, new people to a work culture should try to adapt by mixing in with their new workmates:

There are many elements that need to be considered when trying to fit in, Binoj [a financial officer from India] insists that the best way to adjust to the culture of your new workplace is to build working relationships with Canadians and not just tick with people of your own culture. It can be embarrassing and sometimes humbling but over time you will “fit in” and doors will open for your career to grow. (para. 15)

**Critical thinking** is a characteristic of every graduate of a North American university. According to Williams and McEnerney of the University of Chicago (n.d.), universities put great effort into discovering the unknown in arts and sciences, but also into communicating these discoveries, sharing knowledge, and opening one’s theories and evidence to challenge from others. This is done by writing, and by using evidence that supports our hypotheses. “We write in a way that allows others to test our reasoning: we present our best thinking as a series of claims, reasons, and responses to imagined challenges, so that readers can see not only what we think, but whether they ought to agree.” (Williams and McEnerney, n.d., para 6)

Even though most university students do not go on to become scholars who research and publish their findings, most careers that they pursue after graduating will demand the same skills--researching , analyzing, making arguments and communicating--that they learned during their university education. (Williams and McEnerney, n.d.)

Higher education in western society, then, is about scholastic pursuits: critical reading, critical thinking, and communicating--mostly through writing--with clear arguments in which the writer defends his/her thinking. Writing at the university level is a refinement and perfection of skills that students begin in their fifth year of grade school. This means that by the time students hit their first year of university they have been working on their essay skills for seven years! So, having an extensive knowledge of writing is just part of the university experience. The other very important part is learning how to pull apart an argument and look at it with a skeptical eye: to look at the validity of an argument’s assumptions, the correctness of how the evidence is gathered, and if the evidence correctly supports the conclusions that the writer has drawn. These are among the most valued assets that a university graduate will take to his/her professional job.

**Pragmatism** is all about taking theory and seeing practical applications for it. Though university academics have a reputation for having “head in the clouds” or being deep in thought and not having much practical sense, academics don’t see themselves that way for the most part. They see themselves as being very in-tune with their surrounding and being very sensitive not only to how theories may or may not connect with each other, but also how theories fit into the real world.

**Honesty and Integrity** are two characteristics that this unit on plagiarism will be emphasizing, that are central to the academic culture in North America. Many workplaces say they value these things, but actually the culture may be to appear to be honest and integral, but, in reality not be at all. This is not the case in the education realm in Canada. Lying and cheating by students and professors are not acceptable, and it is looked down on by others within the academic culture. Other students won’t just look the other way if someone is cheating on a test, and professors have been terminated when found out that they have plagiarized. There has been a question that perhaps North American universities take these attributes far too seriously, and perhaps the seriousness will diminish in the future, but at the present all students should be aware that honesty and integrity are a priority for all in the academic culture.

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