Strategies to Create an Inclusive Course

As instructors, it is important to foster an environment that respects diversity in which all students can participate and learn. The strategies outlined are flexible; instructors can implement them in a holistic manner, or take them individually and apply them in the manner that best suits them, their disciplines, and their students.

Self-Reflection on Your Teaching

While there are a number of important techniques for engaging students positively in the classroom, there are also practices that can help instructors avoid ignoring, introducing, or perpetuating counterproductive practices. Consider,

- Have you prepared yourself to address diversity issues in class discussions? Avoid assuming that your discipline or topic is exempt.
- Do you avoid making assumptions about students’ abilities based on stereotypes? Rather than stating “I’m offering a supplemental instruction (SI) because I know women struggle with math,” consider focusing on actions, “I invite you all to attend the SI for more practice.”
- Do you emphasize high standards with verbal assurances that each student can achieve success and discuss what support is in place to help each student meet these high standards?
- Do you seek feedback from your students to gain understanding of their successes and difficulties in your class?
- When lecturing, do you avoid using phrases such as, “It’s easy to see…” or “I’m sure the answer is obvious to all…”? Phrases like these can implicitly discourage students who do not understand from asking questions.
- Do you encourage full participation while being aware of differences that may influence students' responsiveness? Examples: Consider increasing your wait time to make space for more reflective students, ask students to write their responses rather than verbally report them, consider asking students to share their ideas with a classmate.
- Do you vary your class format? Examples: Include within the lecture format time for discussion, reflection, and low-stakes assessment; provide opportunities for large group, small group, paired, and individual work. Consider expanding your repertoire to broaden student engagement.
- Research current terms for social groups. It is important to be sensitive and use current language for social groups.
- Do you reflect on how you treat each individual student with respect?
- Do you set expectations, encourage, and hold students accountable for treating each other with respect?

Course Design

It is critical to examine not just the way we teach, but also our prep work and organization before our courses begin.

Course Alignment


Syllabus

- Review the Interfaith Calendar website (http://www.interfaith-calendar.org/) for world religion sacred dates when scheduling major projects, presentations, exams and course events. Example: Students fasting for Ramadan may choose not to participate in end-of-spring-semester celebrations involving food.
Textbooks, Resources, and Presenting Content

- Is your course accessible to students with different abilities? Provide multiple ways for students to engage in course content. For example, ease barriers for learners by providing supporting materials (such as illustrations) and provide information in multiple modalities: printed and spoken.
- Choose texts from authors of diverse backgrounds. Select content that engages a diversity of ideas and perspectives.
- Discuss contributions made to the field by historically underrepresented groups. Acknowledge historical and contemporary absences of women and people of color when applicable.
- Ensure images and illustrations are representative of diverse appearances (e.g. genders, abilities, ages, etc.).
- Use gender-neutral language, such as they/them in lectures, presentations, assignments, and exams instead of she/he.
- Examples that come easily to us are often those that come from our own experiences. Avoid assuming your students share that experience. Notice if many of your examples are based on regional knowledge, hobbies favored by one gender, or historical or political information unfamiliar to those from other countries.
- Avoid highly idiomatic English. Idioms are especially confusing for nonnative speakers and students raised in another region of the United States. While the expressions may add interest, many students may miss an important concept if the phrase is unfamiliar (e.g. "once in a blue moon," "between a rock and a hard place").
- Carefully consider how you use humor in your classes to ensure it degrades no one. Draw on humor and anecdotes that are relevant to the subject and sensitive to the social and cultural diversity of your students.

Teaching Strategies

Inclusive teaching strategies refer to approaches that support meaningful and accessible learning for all students, promote a sense of belonging, and contribute to a learning environment in which students feel valued.

Your Students

- When students feel valued, included, and respected as individuals, they are more likely to participate in class and engage with the instructor, fellow students, and the subject.
- Treat students as individuals whose identities are complex and unique. Example: Ask open-ended questions to solicit students’ reports of their experiences without calling on a single student to speak for their race, gender, culture, etc.
- Avoid making assumptions based on a student’s appearance (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, and/or disability).
- Consider finding out more about your students using prompts, index cards, or an online survey. Potential questions:
  - Ask their names according to the office of the registrar and if they wish to share preferred alternate names or gender pronouns. Update your attendance and other records with these preferences.
  - Ask how to pronounce students’ names phonetically. Work hard to pronounce each correctly. Read the Cult of Pedagogy’s “How We Pronounce Student Names, and Why it Matters” web post (http://bit.ly/2NM1r5n).
  - Ask the reasons why they signed up for the course and what they are most looking forward to learning.
  - Ask their goals after graduation and how will this course help them achieve their goals.
  - Ask fun questions help you get to know students. Example: “If a song played when you entered the room, what would that song be?” Be ready when they ask you for your answers to the same questions.

Effective practices:

- Photos: Some instructors pair student pictures with student answers to learn names and preferences.
- Large classes: Instructors who teach large classes have used this data to call on people (either by matching faces in the room with photos or by randomly drawing on the data). This helps instructors build classroom community by ensuring a broad base of participation and can make students less likely to disengage during class.

Review additional ways to build community in your class. Review CELT’s Ideas to Create a Welcoming, Engaging and Inclusive Classroom page (http://bit.ly/2VDN0Cg) for simple one-time and mindful semester-long options.
Communication

- Ask “How might this information present barriers to learners?” to help improve accessibility in the broadest possible context. This approach equips you to address the needs of students with physical or cognitive disabilities, learners new to a discipline, and nonnative speakers who find the vocabulary of learning materials inaccessible.

- Don’t assume that students who don’t talk don’t know the material. Some students’ silence may have been learned in response to negative experiences with participation (e.g. being interrupted, not getting credit for ideas, dismissive responses) or in some cultures, asking questions is considered a rude interruption of classtime.

Group Projects and Presentations

- When assigning group projects, ask students to rotate roles. The roles should be non-gender specific and of equal contribution. Example: Ensure that female group members are not always given secretarial/note-taking roles.

- Include group check-ins by asking for the group’s overall plan of action and weekly updates. You may offer useful suggestions and guide their efforts, but give the students agency to make their own decisions about how to proceed.

- Use peer evaluations to assess group work that evaluates both the process and the product. See CELT’s Peer Assessment page (http://bit.ly/celt-peer-assess).

Setting Guidelines to Establish a Climate for Learning

The Iowa State University Principles of Community (http://www.iastate.edu/principles) can serve as guidelines to best facilitate engagement, to assure that peers are inclusive, and to establish a climate for learning.

Iowa State University Principles of Community

Respect: We seek to foster an open-minded understanding among individuals, organizations and groups. We support this understanding through outreach, increasing opportunities for collaboration, formal education programs and strategies for resolving disagreement.

Purpose: We are encouraged to be engaged in the university community. Thus, we strive to build a genuine community that promotes the advancement of knowledge, cooperation and leadership.

Cooperation: We recognize that the mission of the university is enhanced when we work together to achieve the goals of the university. Therefore, we value each member of the Iowa State University community for their insights and efforts, collective and individual, to enhance the quality of campus life.

Richness of diversity: We recognize and cherish the richness of diversity in our university experience. Furthermore, we strive to increase the diversity of ideas, cultures and experiences throughout the university community.

Freedom from discrimination: We recognize that we must strive to overcome historical and divisive biases in our society. Therefore, we commit ourselves to create and maintain a community in which all students, staff, faculty and administrators can work together in an atmosphere free from discrimination, and to respond appropriately to all acts of discrimination.

Honest and respectful expression of ideas: We affirm the right to and the importance of a free exchange of ideas at Iowa State University within the bounds of courtesy, sensitivity and respect. We work together to promote awareness of various ideas through education and constructive strategies to consider and engage in honest disagreements.

Assessment and Evaluation

- All students need clear standards and evaluation criteria, straightforward comments on their work delivered with tact and empathy, and early feedback so that they can change their learning strategies or seek additional help as needed.

- Share tools such as grading rubrics, in addition to assignment descriptions and criteria to help a diverse community of learners understand the requirements of an assignment.

- Consider whether the grading system you employ (for example, grading on a curve) or the weight of assessments (for example, giving only a few high-stakes assignments) might be demotivating for students. Offer multiple lower-stakes opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and use grading strategies that encourage students to develop growth mindsets (the belief that they can improve through personal efforts, assistance from others, and strategies).
Provide specific, actionable, and timely feedback to help students gauge their progress in the class.

Student Feedback
Establish processes to receive anonymous feedback on the course climate and student learning. Make sure to review comments and report back to students at the next class session to validate their perspectives, and make improvements to the course to enhance student learning. If you cannot make the suggested changes, inform students of the rationale.

- The Plus/Delta is ideally conducted in the first quarter of the class. The CIQ can be completed more frequently. The Plus/Delta (visit CELT’s page [http://bit.ly/isu-plusdelta](http://bit.ly/isu-plusdelta)) includes four open-ended questions:
  - What is helping me to learn in this class?
  - What changes are needed in this course to improve learning?
  - What am I doing to improve my learning in the course?
  - What do I need to do to improve my learning in this course?
- Brookfield’s (2017) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) is done periodically and has five questions:
  - At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
  - At what moment in the class were you most distanced from what was happening?
  - What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
  - What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
  - What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be about your reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

Sources


