

## Strategies to Create an Inclusive Course

As instructors, it is important to foster an environment that respects diversity and fosters an open environment in which all students are able to participate and learn. Below are issues to consider when designing and leading a course.

### Syllabus

- Use the [Mindful and Learner-Centered Syllabus Checklist \(PDF\)](#)
- Utilize an [interfaith calendar](#) website for a calendar of religious holidays when planning tests, assessments or assignment due dates.
- Include in your syllabus procedures for making up assignments that are missed due to religious holidays.

### Textbooks and Resources

- Choose a textbook with gender neutral terms. Check to see if examples and photographs include people of all genders and of various races and ethnicities.
- If you do use materials or resources that are not written in neutral language, such as older books and articles, point this out to your students. You may use this as an opportunity to discuss how diversity and inclusion issues have evolved over time in your discipline.

### Your Students

- Ask students how to pronounce their names and work hard to pronounce them correctly. Also, ask students how they would like to be addressed in class.
- Address students consistently. If you refer to a few students by using their first and last names, be sure to use first and last names for all students.
- Treat students as individuals whose identities are complex and unique. Example: You can ask open-ended questions to solicit students' reports of their experiences or observations without calling on a student to speak for his or her race/gender/culture.
- Be aware of possible student anxiety about their performance in a competitive classroom environment. All students - including those whose personal or cultural histories may include being a target of stereotypes and discrimination - 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 get help if needed.

### Communication

- Provide some linguistic redundancy. Many students, particularly non-native speakers of English, benefit from both seeing and hearing language (e.g. using a dry erase board or PowerPoint) and from hearing key ideas stated in different ways.
- Avoid highly idiomatic English. Idioms are especially confusing for non-native speakers of English or any student who may have been raised in another country or another region of the U.S. While the expressions may be colorful, 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").
- Provide an opportunity for students to give anonymous feedback on the classroom climate such as via an anonymous discussion thread in Blackboard, or an anonymous survey tool.

- Don't assume that students who don't talk don't know the material. Being quiet in the classroom and not "showing off" are considered respectful in many cultures. For some students' silence in the classroom may have been learned in response to negative experiences with participation (e.g. being interrupted by others, not getting credit for their ideas, having others talk to them in a condescending or dismissive way).

### Presenting Content

- Use gender neutral language in lectures, presentations, assignments, and exams.
- Be aware of gender and underrepresented groups used in examples. Use examples with women and underrepresented students in desirable roles.
- Promote a respectful classroom climate with egalitarian norms and acceptance of differences. For example, you can encourage student projects involving diverse perspectives, discuss guidelines or "ground rules" for good participation, and monitor language use for implicit assumptions, exclusions, or overgeneralizations.
- Encourage full participation while being aware of differences which may influence students' responses. Example: You can make eye contact with everyone, increase your wait time to include less assertive and/or more reflective students, ask questions that draw out quieter participants or challenge dominant students in small groups, or talk with students outside of class to provide encouragement.
- Vary your teaching methods to take advantage of different learning styles and to expand the repertoire of strategies tried by each student. Example: You can foster peer relationships with in-class collaboration, include concrete examples whenever possible, use visual or dramatic presentations, or value personal knowledge and experience when students share it.
- Use diverse examples rather than ones which assume a particular background or experience. Examples that come easily are often those which come from our own experiences. Make sure you aren't consistently assuming all your students share that experience. For example, notice when many of your examples are based on cultural or regional knowledge, hobbies favored predominantly by one gender, or political or historical knowledge unfamiliar to those from other countries.
- Watch the type of humor that occurs in your classes to be sure it denigrates no one.

### Examine Your Classroom Behavior

In this section critically reflect about what you do when you are teaching.

- Do you prepare yourself to address diversity issues in class discussions? Don't assume that your discipline is immune.
- Do you treat your students equally? Do you make less eye contact with some students?
- When you notice that a student is unprepared for class, do you respond differently depending on your perceptions of their social group? Do you find yourself assessing the attractiveness of students? Does their attractiveness affect your treatment of them?
- When lecturing, do you use phrases such as, "It's easy to see..." or "I'm sure the answer is obvious to all..."? Such phrases implicitly exclude students who may not understand and discourages them from asking questions.
- Check your own assumptions. Assume that not all students in a class are heterosexual. Assume that some of your students are non-Christians. Do not make assumptions about a student's gender identity, race or ethnicity based on appearance.
- Do you use outdated terms for social groups? It's important to be sensitive and use appropriate language for social groups.
- Do you allow students to interrupt each other?
- Do you give feedback that includes praise? Do you use group activities to foster student confidence?

## Group Projects and Presentations

- Make sure small groups are heterogeneous. If possible, groups should contain more than one member from each group to avoid singling out.
- Include group check-ins by asking for the group's overall plan of action and weekly updates. You may offer useful suggestions and also guide their efforts remembering to allow students to make their own decisions about how to proceed.
- Use peer evaluations to assess group work which will evaluate the group process and the product.
- Consider implementing Team-Based Learning as a teaching format to provide students with valuable experience that is reflective of problem solving in real-life workplace environments. Visit [CELT's Team-Based Learning](#) website to learn more.

## Discussions

- Create a safe classroom environment by setting some ground rules for discussion. Establish a contract with your students that outline rules for respectful classroom conduct.
- Ensure all students are able to participate in class discussion and group activities.
- Use a random system for asking questions or encouraging class participation to ensure every student has an equal chance to contribute.
- Monitor class discussions to make sure that one group (or person) is not dominating.
- Allow students to finish their question or comment before answering or responding.

## Assessment and Evaluation

- How students are evaluated should match course objectives. The evaluation procedure should be made clear through a grading rubric.
- Clarify expectations for classroom activities.
- When assigning students tasks, each task assigned should be non-gender specific and of equal contribution.

## Setting Ground Rules for Class Discussions

All classes—whether lecture, seminar, discussion group, or laboratory section— should have explicit rules for discussion and interactions. If there is time in the schedule, these rules should be developed by the class as a whole at the beginning of the term and distributed on paper, Blackboard or by email. Asking students for input signals that you value their perspective and it is likely that they will take the precepts more seriously. If there are time constraints, instructors can begin the process by sharing a proposed set on the first day of the term or in the syllabus.

Classroom discussions provide an opportunity for students to gain skills in communicating and to learn the value of collective exploration. Responses to violations of the ground rules for class discussion should also be discussed at the beginning of the term and be included in the syllabus or distributed once they have been determined.

Examples of ground rules or guidelines include:

- Respect the opinions of others in class discussions. When you disagree, make sure that you use arguments to criticize the idea, not the person.
- Be an active listener even if you don't agree with what is being asserted. If you decide to object or make a comment, it should be clear that you were listening.
- Avoid generalizations.
- Don't interrupt.

- This classroom is a safe space for disagreement. The goal of class discussion is not that everyone agrees but that everyone in the class gains new insights and experiences.
- When offering an opinion or answering a question, support your assertion with arguments and evidence, not generalizations.
- Don't attempt to dominate discussion. Be open to the ideas and experiences of others in the class. If you are nervous about speaking in class, remember that your perspective is valid and the class deserves to hear it.
- If a statement is made that offends you or you think might offend others, speak up and challenge it but always show respect for the person who made it.
- Speak from your own experience. Use "I" not "we" or "you."
- Be conscious of body language. Nonverbal responses can also indicate disrespect.
- Students whose behavior is disruptive either to the instructor or to other students may be asked to leave the classroom.
- Private conversations during class are not appropriate—especially when others are speaking.
- Texting is not allowed during class.
- Laptops can be used for note-taking and class-related activities only.
- Class discussions are private and should not be shared without permission.

## Sources

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