Inclusive and Flexible Learning
Ideas for Improving Your Classroom Experience for All Students

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What is inclusive teaching?

Inclusive teaching means creating a space where everyone feels valued, and diversity of background and need are part of the learning environment. The careful creation and nurturing of such an environment requires you to recognize the limitations of your own perspectives, and seek out the perspectives of others. “Inclusive classrooms are classrooms in which instructors and students work together to create and sustain an environment in which everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged to express their views and concerns.”

Dialogic teaching (pedagogy in which the emphasis is on discussions and inquiry) is one way in which educators can build supportive and engaging classrooms while fostering inclusion. Dialogic teaching can boost social inclusion among students as they explore critical questions together and work towards common goals. As part of dialoging teaching, your openness with students provides them with a better understanding of your perspectives, interests, and humanity (professors are human, right?). Progress, in any subject, is made through dialogue.

What is your why?

“When you know your why, your what becomes more impactful.” – Comedian Michael Jr. Understanding for yourself why you teach and why you enjoy your field of study is more important than what you do (teach, research). From the lens of “why,” you can unlock the humanity in what you do. Your sense of purpose can serve to encourage students in their sense of purpose, thus building relationships and improving inclusivity.

“Teaching is a radical act of hope. It is an assertion of faith in a better future in an increasingly uncertain and fraught present. It is a commitment to that future, even if we can’t clearly discern its shape.” – Kevin Gannon

Things to consider about students

- Students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door. Everyone has visible identifiers (e.g. skin color, perceived gender) and invisible identifiers (e.g., religion, socio-economic status, chronic illness). Students bring their whole self to class, so see them as people first, students (e.g., learners) second.
- Social (and other) forces in life can influence a student’s career and coursework choices. Acknowledge the diverse reasons a student picks (or does not pick) a given career path. Provide guidance when asked or needed, but do not pass judgment.
- Reality and perception both shape a student’s experience in the classroom. Everyone is their own expert on their personal life experiences.
- Stress and anxiety are real for everyone. Acknowledge this. You are allowed to be stressed, too!
Boosting inclusion and engagement

- What do we want students to be (e.g., a good engineer, a competent musician)? We are not teaching a subject; rather we are teaching students to immerse into a subject. To further their immersion, be sure diverse content and individuals are represented (e.g., pictures of women and minorities running lab experiments).

- Engaging students via their own connections to content can improve performance, and provide them with a better sense of belonging. Provide multiple contextualizations of content when possible. Relatedness to material improves motivation.

- Aligning student and educator expectations early (and with reminders as needed) can boost accountability while also reducing stress for students. Check out Classroom Contracts as one accountability artifact.

- Think about ways, authentic to you, in which you will develop meaningful relationships with students. How can you be yourself in the classroom such that you also encourage students to be themselves?

Suggested ideas to foster inclusion

- Start the year off with a student survey. You can adapt classroom activities to meet the multiple and varied needs of your students. Every class is different! Ask questions like:
  - What do you hope to learn in this course?
  - How best do you learn?
  - What makes a good professor?
  - Is there anything specific you’d like me, the professor, to know about your learning habits, work habits, and/or personal life?

- Create a “facebook” document where students submit a picture, fun facts, and their major/interests. Don't forget to include yourself! You will get to know your students, and they will get to know you. Learn pronouns and how to correctly pronounce all names!

- Small group activities like think-pair-share allow students to generate their own ideas, then get to know their classmates during small group discussion.

Suggested ideas for flexibility

- Collect informal feedback at the start of the semester (e.g., student survey) and early-mid semester to gage student concerns. Course correct your teaching as needed. Asking in ~week 5 what teaching methods do and do not work for students provides you with valuable information, and gives students the chance to have their voices heard.

- If possible, build 1-2 weeks of the term as “free” topics. Based on student suggestions, add content that is of interest to the class. It gives students the chance to personally connect with material, and provides a sense of autonomy over their educational experience.

- Check your classroom policies. Have you built in any flexibility concerning deadlines, extensions, etc? How have you and will you handle unexpected events, especially during current global pandemic conditions? There is a balance between firm and flexible with class policies; figure out the right balance for you and the learning environment you foster. Remember, students are people first, learners second!