Practical Pointers for an Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Classroom

Portland State University is the most diverse public university in Oregon. We take pride in a strategic plan that identifies expanding our commitment to equity as a strategic goal and incorporates an equity lens. As a member of the PSU faculty you are expected to exemplify this reality both within your classrooms and your faculty/student interactions campus-wide.

Global Diversity & Inclusion seeks to support your efforts. Whether you are adjunct, non-tenure track (NTTF), tenure-track, or tenured, we recognize the integral and central role that you play within our community. We offer a variety of workshops, including a special two-part series on inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

It takes intentional work to cultivate a truly inclusive campus. Consider the practical pointers below regarding conscious choices and defining classroom moments. Though merely the tip of the iceberg, perhaps a few of these recommendations and resources will come in handy as you face the academic year ahead!

EMBRACING DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Conscious Choices

It is easy to support diversity, equity and inclusion in theory. However, it is not always easy to identify how this theory might translate in our everyday practices.

Embracing diversity requires paying attention to it regardless of who is in the room.

- Prior to the start of classes contact students to confirm the name that they would like to go by. This will allow you to affirm a student who may be using a name other than the legal name listed on a roster.
- Whenever possible, configure your classroom/lab/office to reflect consideration of varied physical abilities.
- Include gender pronouns in class introductions (yourself included) and/or use gender neutral pronouns (they, them, their, theirs) as a standard practice.
- Use images, references, resources, etc. that reflect diverse communities and perspectives.
Equity and equality are not the same thing. Consider the distinctions when it comes to pedagogy and general interactions with students.

- Provide multiple ways for students to participate, creating a culture that values everyone’s voice, not just the fastest and/or loudest.
- Allow multiple approaches to assignments.
- When encouraging students to take advantage of opportunities such as office hours, do not assume that including it in the syllabus is enough. Communicate the intention, purpose and relevance for all students. For example, some students avoid office hours due to the perceived stigma of remedial services, while other students regard office hours as an opportunity for academic and professional mentoring.
- Pay attention to patterns/differences in interaction that may be a function of your sociopolitical identity relative to that of your students. Understand that students within the same class may receive you differently based upon your perceived identities. Likewise, be willing to examine the assumptions, explicit and implicit biases that you may have regarding your students. See common biases and assumptions on the University of Michigan and University of Virginia websites listed in the resources section. Explore implicit biases using the Harvard Project Implicit website.

An inclusive learning environment reflects intentional efforts with regard to culture, climate, and curriculum.

- Seek to create accessible materials prior to the start of classes. Approach accessibility as a marker of an inclusive classroom rather than an inconvenience prompted by a particular student.
- When creating your course and syllabus pay attention to the authorship of the materials that you use. Consider scholarship that demonstrates your respect for multiple voices and perspectives within the field. For example, though your content area might be culturally-specific you could make intentional choices with regard to the gender of the scholars that you choose.
- If your field/canon is limited regarding diverse voices, consider addressing rather than ignoring this void.
- Include some reference to the classroom culture and climate in your syllabus, in addition to the standard compliance statements. This will differentiate your intentions to create an inclusive environment from material that is perceived as required institutional language.
- When constructing your assignments and lesson plans consider ways to incorporate various learning styles (auditory, visual, etc.).
- Establish/Create/Co-Create a community agreement to address the culture and climate of your learning environment. This should provide guidelines to reflect upon and hold one another accountable for the duration of the course.
• Learn to properly pronounce student names when they reflect a language/culture other than your own (and expect your students to do the same). This effort reflects a desire for inclusion rather than assimilation, as the tendency to immediately truncate, anglicize and/or create nicknames encourages.

• Encourage and model personal connections to the material.

• Be mindful of different communication styles during classroom interactions. For example, one student may answer questions using a narrative style while another student may have a more linear approach. Your ability to engage with and respect both will influence the perceptions of their peers.

• Among the challenges of assigning group work is the possibility of having students with marginalized identities become further marginalized. Prior to establishing groups, pay attention to classroom dynamics to gauge how prescriptive you will need to be. Should you have a small group of students who share a particular identity, do not tokenize these individuals by requiring them to separate from others who may function as their support system. (Food for Thought: It is often said that faculty notice when the few students of color are sitting together. Yet, do we notice that the white students are also sitting together?)

• Create mechanisms for meaningful student feedback prior to end of term evaluations.

In the midst of...
  a difficult class session | a difficult week | a difficult term

Brought on by...
  volatile interactions | conflicting student perspectives | tumultuous current events

How do you respond?

Defining Classroom Moments

In moments of crisis, confusion, conflict and change, we sometimes struggle to maintain control of our classrooms. How we respond in these moments can determine how students ultimately view and experience our courses.

Faculty as Community Member: Do not underestimate your role in the classroom culture. Students pay attention to faculty response regardless of whether the moment originated between students. Faculty intervention signals concern for the classroom culture and climate (and ultimately the students).

The Need to Pause: We can sometimes be overwhelmed by the urgency of the moment or even our own personal connection to what has occurred. It is okay to take a pause to breathe and gather your thoughts (while encouraging your students to do the same). It is important that you frame your pause as an opportunity to reflect with the intention of coming back to the moment, rather than a strategy to avoid the moment.
No Pause Necessary: Experience with certain comments and behaviors related to our content area often prepares us for an immediate response to the moment. Whether you find yourself articulating critical analysis or presenting relevant information, students sometimes appreciate a substantive response grounded in the material.

Be Proactive: If you have not had significant experience teaching your content yet you are aware that there is a potential for classroom conflict due to the subject matter, consider thinking through your responses to a few scenarios as you prepare for your class sessions. (Though of course we all know to expect the unexpected!)

Outside Events / Inside Repercussions: At first glance you might determine that a particular societal moment has absolutely no bearing on your classroom. At second glance, consider whether there are any tangible connections to or implications regarding your subject matter. Exploring these connections/implications can provide invaluable context and insight for your students.

Outside Events / Inside Repercussions II: A significant societal moment may have no direct correlation to your subject matter, however it still has the potential to severely impact your classroom environment. Pay attention to shifts within the classroom environment. Taking the time to acknowledge and/or discuss the moment tells your students that you are mindful of the impact of these larger events on their lives and possibly their level of classroom engagement and participation.

Be Honest: Respect your students enough to be honest when confronted with questions outside of your knowledge base. It is okay not to know. None of us have all of the answers. That being said, be open to the possibility of expanding your base when confronted with relevant inquiries and perspectives.

Use Your Resources: In some instances the emergence of subject matter relevant to your course, yet outside of your expertise/comfort level, may cause you to bring in a colleague for a guest lecture or Q&A. You might also consult Global Diversity & Inclusion to present on diversity/equity/inclusion related subject matter.

Beware of Letting the Clock Run Out: Though we may secretly hope that the adage “time heals all wounds” will apply in our defining moment situations, pausing indefinitely does not adequately address the moment. Though some pauses may require ten minutes while others require a week (for prep and planning), waiting more than a week to return to the matter in some way, sends signals to our students. The perception that you did not find the occurrence important enough to alter your plans can translate as abandonment and lack of support for deeply affected students.

Encourage Self-Care: Though you may ask folks to pause, not everyone will. Recognize that some may be more deeply affected than others. Create a classroom culture that says that it is alright to take care of yourself by leaving the room when necessary. It is also okay to check in with individual students (or the entire group) before, after, and sometimes during class, to reaffirm that self-care is expected and respected within your classroom community.
**Post Pause:** Whether you focus on providing content, inspiring social justice, or encouraging critical analysis, address the situation/issue/concern rather than focusing solely on specific students. Revisit any community norms that you have articulated as a class (if you have not already done so, consider creating such an agreement). Encourage self-reflection as well as peer feedback.

**Help Students Process:** Depending upon the nature of the moment, create mechanisms to help folks process, such as journaling/written reflection, or the submission of anonymous questions related to the moment. Taking an additional five to ten minutes of class time in the short run can create a more effective learning environment in the long run.

**In Hindsight:** If you somehow missed the initial moment, do not assume that you are off the hook. The defining moment comes when you address what you missed, humbly, transparently and compassionately.

**Recognizing Scope:** Remember that defining moments affect the entire class, not just those who are most vocal, visibly distressed, or from particular identity groups.

**Community vs. Control:** Consider the distinction between “losing control” of the prescribed agenda and losing students. Keeping the desire for an engaged student body central to your pedagogy can help to alleviate the fear of losing control that sometimes accompanies defining moments. Remember that culture and climate issues can affect a student’s ability to access content.

**The New Normal:** Once the moment has passed, be aware of residual effects. Don’t assume that things are back to normal, consider that there is a new normal. Hopefully students have had an opportunity to challenge one another intellectually, gain insight regarding varied perspectives and ultimately grow as a community.

**Defining moments…**

are not just for your students. They have the power to impact us as well. Making conscious choices to connect with your classroom community in ways that are supportive and affirming creates fertile ground for academic innovation and rigor.
Resources
Consider the following resources for strategies to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments, as well as to address difficult subject matter and help navigate defining campus/classroom moments. Each site provides numerous additional resources for you to explore.

**For Inclusive & Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching

Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Virginia
http://cte.virginia.edu/resources/teaching-a-diverse-student-body-practical-strategies-for-enhancing-our-students-learning/

Culturally Responsive & Inclusive Curriculum Resources, Portland State University
http://guides.library.pdx.edu/culturallyresponsivecurriculum

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice by Geneva Gay

Office of Teaching & Learning, University of Denver
http://otl.du.edu/inclusive-excellence-and-our-teaching/

Project Implicit, Harvard University
https://implicit.harvard.edu/

Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, Penn State University
www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu

**For Defining Classroom Moments**

Center for Research on Learning & Teaching, University of Michigan
http://www.crlt.umich.edu

Charlottesville Syllabus
https://daily.jstor.org/charlottesville-syllabi-history-hate-america/

Difficult Dialogues
http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/national_movement

Difficult Dialogues, Vanderbilt University
https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/cft/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/

Difficult Dialogues
http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/strategies_and_resources/by_technique

Scholars Strategy Network

Teaching Tolerance
https://www.tolerance.org

Global Diversity & Inclusion offers professional development opportunities ranging from traditional presentations and workshops to individual and group consultancies. Contact Lisa Grady-Willis, Director of Diversity Education & Learning at lmg6@pdx.edu to schedule a session. Look to the GDI website for current offerings. https://www.pdx.edu/diversity/