

# Creating Inclusive College Classrooms

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Inclusive classrooms are classrooms in which instructors and students work together to create and sustain an environment in which everyone feels safe, supported, and

## Choosing Course Content

Some GSIs have a great deal of control over the content of a course, especially the content of their section, while others do not. It is helpful for students to know the extent to which you, as a GSI, have control. If students criticize or make suggestions about course content, texts, material, etc., over which you do not have control, you should convey their comments to the faculty member in charge of the course and encourage them to do the same.

When you have some control over the content (including books, coursepacks, and other materials), the following two questions and their related suggestions should be considered:

reasons, instructors have a responsibility to make students aware of the texts' limitations at the beginning of the course and to facilitate students' ability to read critically with these issues in mind.

- Be aware of and responsive to the portrayal of certain groups in course content. For example, if an Asian country's policies are being used to contrast American policies, the policy of the Asian country should not always be used as a negative example (e.g., social policies in China) or always used as a positive example (e.g., business in Japan). You need to address the role of culture in foreign policies and not present policies as either wholly good or bad. Such treatment ignores the complexity of other cultures' policies or practices.
- Avoid dichotomizing issues of race into black and white. It is essential to recognize and acknowledge that there are other groups for whom racial issues are relevant (Arab Americans, Asians Americans, Latinos/as, Native Americans, etc.). Whenever possible, perspectives on racial issues from other groups should be included in course materials. If you have difficulty finding such materials, you should bring other perspectives into course lectures and discussions.

## **Increasing Awareness of Problematic Assumptions**

An important early step in developing competencies to address multicultural issues in the classroom is to raise your awareness of issues that are multicultural and how they might manifest themselves in classrooms. In this process, it is useful to give consideration to assumptions that you may hold about the learning behaviors and capacities of your students. You may also hold assumptions that are tied to students' social identity characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, disability, language, sexual orientation, etc.). These assumptions may manifest themselves in your interactions with students. You may need assistance in order to become aware of your assumptions. You should consider getting to know your students to be an ongoing process related to developing a positive classroom climate that promotes excellence.

Below are examples of assumptions, how they might be dealt with, and how you might learn more about your students through the process of addressing these types of assumptions.

**Assumption:**

If you feel that it is important to know whether students speak or understand other languages, you should ask this question of all students, not just those to whom you think the question applies. If there are concerns about students' academic writing skills, it would be best to meet with the students during office hours to discuss their work. One of the questions you could ask as part of your data gathering protocol is, "What were the languages spoken in the environment in which you were raised?" Following this question with appropriate probes would give you an opportunity to find out whether students are native speakers of English and, if not, how recently they became fluent. It is important to identify the source of students' difficulty with writing (or speaking), because identification of the factors that contribute to the problem will influence the actions taken to address the problem.

**Assumption:** Students who are affiliated with a particular group (gender, race, ethnic, etc.) are experts on issues related to that group and feel *comfortable* being seen as information sources to the rest of the class and the instructor who are not members of that group. AND/OR European American students do not have opinions about issues of race or ethnicity and members of other groups do have opinions about these issues.

One way to effectively deal with this set of assumptions is to pose questions about particular groups to the entire class rather than presuming that members of a certain group are the only ones who can reply. For example, questions could be phrased so that students would be able to share experiences of their friends or comments that they've heard as well as their own experiences. It would be best to let the class know that if any individual has experiences or information that she or he thinks would be beneficial to the class, she or he should inform you about such experiences or information. If you would like to hear from a particular student on a specific issue that relates to group membership, you should speak with the student privately instead of calling on the student when the issue arises in class. In this way, you can find out the students' ability to comment on the issue and willingness to do so publicly. This would avoid putting the student in an awkward position, particularly if the student lacks knowledge about questions related to his or her group.

**Assumption:** All students from a particular group share the same view on an issue, and their perspective will necessarily be different from the majority of the class who are not from that group.

You can regularly encourage all students to express different perspectives on issues, and you should not express surprise when people from the same "group" share opposing views or have a view consistent with the majority of the class. It is important to understand, however, that some students who are part of a "group" will feel hesitant to share views publicly that differ from the "anticipated group position" for fear of being

This would most frequently occur in courses in which students read literature. Instructors should be careful not to treat with suspicion comments that suggest affiliation with a character that does not resemble the student in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. For example, if a Caucasian student claims to feel her or his experiences resonate with an African American character, you should not dismiss her or his response, but probe for further explication about why she or he feels the connection.

**Assumption:** Students from certain groups are more likely to: be argumentative or conflictual during class discussions OR not participate in class discussions OR bring a more radical agenda to class discussions.

Participation levels vary across all students, with some students more comfortable in listening roles and others more comfortable taking the lead in class discussions. While these discussion styles may be influenced by students' past experiences, families of origin, and cultural reference points, a priori assumptions about student participation may hinder class discussion. It is important that you encourage participation among all students while also respecting the differences among students that will emerge. More equitable discussions can often be created by prefacing the discussion with a writing exercise that provides all students with the opportunity to clarify their thoughts on the discussion topic. It is also useful to remember that students' participation levels evolve over the course of a term as they become more comfortable with the course, their classmates, and the instructor.

## Planning Considerations

There are a number of multicultural issues that should be taken into account during the planning process for any class. You need to become comfortable with your lack of knowledge about certain groups and seek ways to inform yourself (e.g., through experiences, readings, and/or conversations with faculty, peers, and students who are knowledgeable about the particular groups). Below you will find examples of the sorts of issues that might be considered in order to increase your awareness of multicultural issues during the planning process.

### *Accommodations*

Students may have religious holidays and practices that require accommodations at certain times during the academic calendar year. Students with disabilities may also require special accommodations. To be sensitive to the religious needs of students, it is important to read the "Religious Holidays and the Academic Calendar" handout provided each year by the Provost's Office so that you are aware of the holidays that occur during the semester you are teaching. Contact Services for Students with Disabilities (763-3000) for information on ways that you can accommodate the needs of those students. At the beginning of the semester, ask your students to let you know if their attendance, their participation in class, or their ability to complete an assignment on time will be affected by their observance of religious holidays or practices, or because of a disability. Give advance consideration to requests for reasonable and fair

accommodations. Some instructors ask for this information on data sheets that students complete on the first day of class.

### *Attendance*

Students who are different in a highly visible way (women who wear Islamic clothing,

example, are sessions with small groups of students doing problem sets always conducted by asking questions? Are whole-group discussions preferred and the only method used? Once you have a sense of your strategy preferences, you should consider alternative techniques that will help your students learn more effectively. If you typically give mini-lectures to students, you might consider using visual materials (e.g., charts, diagrams, video), demonstrations, hands-on activities, cooperative group work, etc.

### *Controversial Topics*

Class sessions that address controversial topics may result in any of the following unintended outcomes: (a) altercations between individual students or groups of students, (b) silence from students who feel intimidated or fear conflict, (c) the assertion and perpetuation of false stereotypes or problematic assumptions, or (d) the expression of offensive speech. There are no easy answers for dealing with these situations when they occur. It is best to work toward the prevention of these occurrences by investing time in the planning process. When working with a particular controversial topic, anticipate possible responses and how you might deal with differing yet passionate views on that topic. You should plan strategies that provide structure for these discussions and that foster students' ability to express their own ideas well while also increasing their ability to listen to and learn from others. In the interest of free speech, students should be encouraged to honestly share their views during discussions. Be prepared, however, to correct stereotypes and challenge students' assumptions when comments are shared. It can be a difficult task to reconcile the tension between challenging offensive speech and not suppressing free speech. You should also consider your own response to emotion in the classroom and use this awareness to inform the planning process.



There are a variety of reasons for using cooperative groups (to facilitate student learning, to improve interpersonal relationships among students, to foster responsibility for students' own learning and the learning of others, etc.). You might create in-class and/or out-of-class groups (lab groups, homework groups, problem-solving groups, study groups, etc.). Because group composition can have a significant impact on group functioning, you should use a variety of methods to create groups. Such methods include: assigning students to groups (e.g., make heterogeneous groups across certain characteristics such as gender, race, and/or level of achievement in a particular discipline, or by where student8csq &P ¢F a áqNiv&q B âAjp ÆÜv J ÄG @á °ÄA

- You may need to make an extra effort to reduce the chances that a student who is different from the majority of the class will feel isolated (an African American student in a predominantly white class; a male in a predominantly female class; an openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual student in a class composed predominantly of heterosexuals, etc.). For example, if students are shunning a classmate during small group activities because their classmate is gay and they are homophobic, you (irrespective of your personal perspective on homosexuality) have a responsibility to intervene on behalf of the excluded student. Even when guidelines have been established for participation and responsibilities within groups, problems may arise. It is essential to act quickly when they do. You could begin by reviewing the guidelines for group work. An initial change (if students are forming their own groups) would be to assign individuals to groups and make sure each individual within the group has a role. Another option would be to put students in pairs. It is more difficult to exclude an individual when there are only two participants. If all else fails, it would be important to set up a meeting with the excluded student and together you could generate a variety of actions that could be taken to improve the classroom climate. This would be a show of support to the student. While it is important to solicit student input, you cannot expect the student to have the time or experience to solve the problem. If efforts are made to improve the situation and little change occurs, you might speak with a consultant from CRLT.

## **Getting to Know the Students**

### *Decisions, Comments, & Behaviors During the Teaching Process*

If you are responsible for teaching sections of a course, it is essential to understand that even when you have limited input into course content, you have much control over how that content gets taught. Teaching is a complex activity in which there are multiple levels of interaction among students and between GSIs and students. Students all bring very different backgrounds, knowledge, and learning styles to a particular course. There are multiple interpretations of content constructed by individual students during the learning process. Also, some students construct different images of their instructors which are counter to how you might see yourself. Because of the complexity and unpredictability of teaching, you should carefully plan your course sessions and always be prepared for the unexpected to occur. The following points address many of the issues that may arise during the teaching process.

#### *Working with Course Content*

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honest about your lack of knowledge, acknowledge the students' point, and make efforts to secure information about the students' point to share with the class in a future session. It is also important to emphasize that everyone can be a teacher and that instructors and students can learn from one another. You can also ask students to send you e-mail messages, chat with you during office hours, or drop notes in your mailbox as concerns about course content arise. You should make every effort to address these issues or explain to students why they will not be addressed.

- *Be open to students' reactions to course material, even when you feel uncomfortable with the manner in which they are expressed.* Be prepared for students to publicly challenge inaccurate information about particular groups that appears in class readings, films, etc. Students may react strongly upon hearing what they perceive to be inaccurate and negative information about their group. You may find yourself teaching courses that have the reputation

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environment. For example, students may not be allowed to do assignments on certain topics because of the instructor's assumption about the students' biases. In one course, women wearing Islamic head scarves were readily identified as Muslim and not allowed to write a paper on Islam; it was more difficult to readily identify students as Christian from their appearance, so they were not prevented from writing papers on Christianity. Students from underrepresented groups may also feel a self-imposed pressure always to portray themselves in a good light so they do not reinforce stereotypes about

normalize the experience of conflict in the classroom, particularly in classes that focus on controversial topics. This can be accomplished through explicit discussion of student experiences with conflict and the use of structured discussion exercises.

- *Maintain the role of facilitator.* One of the challenges of teaching is maintaining the role of instructor under a variety of conditions. For example, you can get caught up in expressing your own perspective in heated discussions or can become overly silent in discussions that go beyond your own knowledge base or experience. While these responses are understandable, such role abdication can create chaos in the classroom or force students to fill in the abdicated facilitator role. In order to avoid this outcome, you should examine your typical responses to conflict. It can also be useful to find ways that you may admit your limits with respect to content areas while maintaining responsibility for the group process.