

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

For a learning environment to be truly inclusive, it must actively grapple with issues relating to diversity and cultural awareness in a way ensures students of differing backgrounds and experiences are both comfortable and safe. This handout explores several proactive ways to create and maintain an inclusive classroom.

Pre-Semester

Creating an inclusive classroom begins before you build out your course. In addition to the required ADA paragraph, your syllabus must include clear policies that address students of different backgrounds, communicating the ways that you will strive to make all students comfortable. Inform students about what resources are available to them and include multiple ways for students to contact you (or the proper department) if necessary. Specifically include a way for students to send you messages anonymously through Canvas.

Syllabus Example: “I want to be sure that you are able to learn in a manner that is comfortable. If you need any accommodations or have specific needs or triggers that I should be aware of, please feel free to contact me in whatever way is most comfortable. “

- Does your syllabus define what an inclusive learning environment is and have you explained how you expect students to help implement one?
- Does your syllabus include information on-campus resources available to students? (e.g. Veteran’s Center, LGBTQ resource center, Center for Disability Services, etc.)
- Does your syllabus indicate the various ways that students can submit feedback?
- Have you built your course so that students are exposed to multiple and diverse perspectives?

Establishing Expectations

During the first week(s) of class you should work to establish clear expectations for your students concerning their behavior. You may choose to have a discussion with your students about what constitutes a positive classroom environment. This gives them a foundation to build from throughout the course. Remind students that creating an inclusive environment requires their feedback, and be sure to model appropriate behavior yourself.

In-Class Example: “In order to better understand what is and is not working for you in this class, I’ve set up a place to submit feedback anonymously online and I will check in with you periodically throughout the semester.”

- o What are your plans to share your expectations in the first week?
- o How do you intend to explain what a positive class environment is?
- o Do you have plans to evaluate your class mid-semester? (e.g. Mid-term online feedback, focus group, etc.)
- o How often will you remind students about submitting feedback or concerns?

Maintaining an Inclusive Environment

Communicating expectations is essential, but maintenance of an inclusive environment is just as important. Throughout the semester, remind students what your expectations are and what they can anticipate from you in terms of effort and preparation. That involves checking in with students often for various kinds of feedback and being flexible enough to work around their needs.

Maintenance Discussion Example: Show how this change is **INCLUSIVE** in that it addresses learning styles:

“Based on the response to the activity last week, I have decided to incorporate more activities that involve more individual writing as opposed to group collaboration.”

- o How are you modeling inclusivity throughout the classroom?
- o Are you using inclusive/diverse examples in your lesson planning and teaching?
- o Are you challenging derogatory statements?
- o What kinds of pedagogical approaches are you utilizing to reach different learning styles?
- o Have you provided students with multiple ways to contact you and provide feedback?

Post-Semester Reflection

- o Do you feel like you successfully created an inclusive environment?
- o Can you identify areas that could be improved?

Suggested Readings and References

- Adams, M. & Bell, L.A. (2007). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. Routledge: New York, NY.
- Singleton, G. E., & Linton, C. W. (2005). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Smith, Daryl. (2009). *Diversity’s Promise for Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD.