

Tips for Creating Inclusive College Classrooms

A Sharing of Thoughts and Suggestions



Office of Diversity and Inclusion University of Central Florida

In an inclusive college classroom, the participants work together to create and maintain a climate of openness and respect that encourages individuals to share their perspectives and thoughts for the purposes of mutual understanding, growth, and development. Inclusive classrooms are welcoming, secure, diverse, and interactive. In an inclusive college classroom, instructors strive to be responsive to students as individuals with many intersectionalities, as well as cognizant of students' uniqueness and value in relationship to the broader classroom culture.

The Diversity Track of the 2014 Summer Faculty Development Conference at the University of Central Florida focused its efforts on the development of suggestions for ways in which to create inclusive college classrooms. The track relied heavily on a framework proposed by Shari Saunders and Diana Kardia in their article, *Creating Inclusive College Classrooms* (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, 2013), and the thoughts below are organized around the five aspects of teaching identified by these authors:

- Course Content
- Prior Assumptions and Level of Awareness of Potential Multicultural Issues

- Planning for Class Sessions
- Knowledge of the Diverse Backgrounds of Students
- Decisions, Comments, and Behaviors Made or Displayed During the Process of Teaching

Course Content

➤ The Syllabus

- ✓ Create a syllabus that is relevant and up-to-date in order to engage the interest of diverse students in the topics to be discussed.
- ✓ Explore what students wish to get out of the course; when possible, allow for choices; attempt to discover students' prior knowledge and/or expectations for the course through a survey, writing exercise, or discussion, and modify course content as needed.
- ✓ Identify which of UCF's cultural competencies are being taught and developed in class sessions.
- ✓ Supply the syllabus information in various formats such as printed, audio, braille, etc.

➤ Course Content

- ✓ Be aware of and respectful of all learning modalities in designing course content and experiences.
- ✓ Include learning opportunities that encourage students to enrich the course content through the sharing of diverse perspectives.
- ✓ Incorporate materials that represent the diversity in the classroom to avoid misinterpretations and the exclusion of individuals and groups.
- ✓ Include multiple perspectives on each topic in the course; avoid providing a single focus or point of view.
- ✓ Include materials written or created by people of different backgrounds and/or perspectives.
- ✓ Include in the course assignments that are sensitive to a wide range of dimensions of diversity and intersectionalities.
- ✓ Vary the types of assignments that are provided to students (written, oral, group work, field trips, etc.)

- ✓ Provide assignments that help develop UCF's cultural competencies.

Prior Assumptions and Level of Awareness of Potential Multicultural Issues

- Have high expectations for all students; encourage all individuals to fully develop their potentials in the classroom and beyond.
- Take stock of your lack of knowledge about certain groups and inform yourself.
- Reflect on and be aware of your own biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. To the extent possible, monitor your personal assumptions about aspects of diversity such as race, culture, gender, class, etc. to minimize any negative impacts on learners.
- Become aware of any cultural reference points you use to elucidate content; commit to drawing from a variety of cultures so that some students aren't left out.
- Consider your own assumptions about the learning behaviors and capacities of your students.
- Research suggests that some common biases and deficiencies in awareness may exist in teaching. For example, teachers tend to call on men more often than women, and teachers look at or call on a student they perceive as a "member of a group" when covering material having to do with the group. Be aware of and monitor your behavior around these situations.

Planning for Class Sessions

- Consider how each learning experience contributes to developing a community of learners who feel respected and connected to each other.
- Teachers often teach the same way that they learn; be aware of this and include a variety of instructional strategies in the class to allow students opportunities to show what they know and have learned.
- Consider topics that might be controversial in the course content, and determine in advance how you will prepare both yourself and your students to discuss these topics in respectful and inclusive ways that allow for all voices to be heard.

- Be aware of assignments that may require additional resources, such as travel expenses or extra materials; recognize that not all students may be able to afford add-ons to cost.
- Determine how group assignments will be structured so that expectations for each group member are clearly specified; determine how students will demonstrate their active participation in the assignment; decide how to best help students understand that diverse perspectives enhance the quality of the outcome produced through their joint efforts.
- When planning course structure, consider implementing student-to-student learning in which all members of the class help build knowledge.
- Choose methods of evaluation that examine student performance in the course in a fair and equitable manner; to avoid misunderstandings and to establish clear expectations, determine ahead of time how students will be graded.
- Respect and accommodate religious holidays and practices when planning deadlines and class activities; be aware of the university's policy regarding religious observances.
- Familiarize yourself with UCF's policies and available services regarding students with disabilities.

Knowledge of the Diverse Backgrounds of Students

- Get to know your students! Consider doing some ice-breaker exercises at the start of the course. Activities might include:
 - ✓ Providing the opportunity for individual or small-group introductions
 - ✓ Engaging in "Treasure Hunt" activities; be sure to structure these in inclusive ways
 - ✓ Telling stories
 - ✓ Writing brief autobiographies
 - ✓ Using name tags
- Be aware of and open to students' reactions to course material (even if they express it in a way that makes you uncomfortable); these reactions are a reflection of their diverse perspectives and life experiences and offer a view of how students think about issues.

- Be responsive to students; consider having an “open door” policy; answer student emails promptly.
- Make connections with your students, and build caring, mentoring relationships with them; this is important when striving to create an inclusive and successful classroom environment.
- Be open to the “*teachable moment*,” digressions in the classroom may create wonderful opportunities to learn about your students and may establish mutual understanding and respect.
- Be open to and aware of student concerns and requests.
- Look for students in the classroom who tend to be “invisible” and determine ways to create experiences where they would be comfortable sharing their thoughts and perspectives.

Decisions, Comments, and Behaviors Made or Displayed During the Process of Teaching

- Display behaviors that motivate and inspire students to learn and share.
- Conduct an interactive class where each group is represented and acknowledged to avoid “invisible students.”
- Model the use of inclusive language in all interactions with students.
- Pay attention when a student is speaking; allow all students the opportunity to be heard; use conversation and interaction to promote inclusion.
- Be cognizant of both verbal and non-verbal communication; in interactions with students, try to avoid micro-inequities and microaggressions; display micro-affirmations.
- Be an ally during conversations, mediating when micro-inequities, microaggressions, or stereotypes arise; at the same time, try not to make assumptions about the behaviors a student displays; there are many cultural variations in body language.
- Be prepared to intervene on behalf of any student you notice being excluded from group or classroom activities.
- Be aware of gender dynamics in the classroom.
- Address conflicts in the classroom carefully to avoid creating a hostile learning environment.
- When considering the best interests of all learners, reflect on the usefulness of providing students with opportunities for mentorship outside of the classroom.

The 2014 Diversity Track participants included Mr. Brian Barone, Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Dr. Edward Dandrow, Ms. Lauryn De George, Ms. Silvia Diaz, Dr. Ann Gleig, Dr. Fayeza Hasanat, Ms. Dayanara Hudson, Dr. Alla Kourova, Mrs. Virginia Ludwig, Ms. Holly McDonald, Ms. Irina McLaughlin, Dr. Florin Mihai, Dr. Olga Molina, Dr. George Musambira, Dr. Deepa Nair, Dr. Obi Nwakanma, Dr. Timothy Rotarius, Dr. JoAnne Stephenson, Ms. Huaixiang Tan, Ms. Barbara Thompson, Dr. Ezekiel Walker, and Ms. Cynthia Walters.