Cultivate a welcoming and inclusive course climate

What does it look like to teach in ways that can engage and challenge all students? What does an inclusive classroom climate look like? How important is the role of an instructor's understanding of social identity and pedagogical reflection in promoting positive course climate for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, students with disabilities, neurodiverse students, LGBTQIA+ students, students of various religious and spiritual beliefs, and other marginalized student populations? And what is the role of course content and social context in establishing a positive course climate?

As the demographic landscape of university campuses, including Northwestern's, continues to evolve, there is a pressing need for institutions and instructors to find ways to foster inclusion and excellence with an increasingly heterogeneous classroom population. Inclusive instructors shift their focus beyond intellectual and skill development to consider how social and emotional dimensions affect student learning. Research suggests that the best indicator of students' overall satisfaction with their institution is classroom climate.[37]

COURSE CLIMATE

Course climate has been defined by Ambrose and colleagues as "the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn."[38] Course climate, fundamentally interpersonal in nature, is created through multiple interacting variables that include student-student interactions, instructor-student interactions, course demographics, course content and material, and instances of stereotyping and tokenism. An inclusive course climate is not a means to an end, nor should climate be thought of as a good versus bad binary; rather, climate is a continuum that can be assessed and adjusted over the duration of the instruction period.

Not all courses explicitly explore identity and sociological structures; however, it is important that instructors understand how systems of oppression manifest themselves in the *how* and *what* of course content, regardless of topic. An inclusive curriculum framework moves away from explicit marginalization, where only one, often white and Western, dominant perspective is presented. Inclusive instructors avoid implicitly centralizing one or two token perspectives in readings, lectures, and other content in an effort to comply with requirements or to create the appearance of inclusion.[39]

"I am especially dissatisfied with students who trivialize Black problems and issues. There have been a number of instances in classes where we were discussing Black culture and students would say incredibly inappropriate comments without being reprimanded."
(2016 Black Student Experience Survey, Northwestern Student Experience Report)

Furthermore, the content of a course and the social context (i.e., immediate social or physical environment) within which it is taught interact with each other and permeate course climate. Research findings note, "the importance of the instructor in attending not only to subtleties of classroom climate within the physical bounds of the classroom but also to broader social contexts outside the classroom."[40] Instructors' effectively connecting diverse course content with social and institutional contexts is an indicator of an inclusive course climate.

LEARNING-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

The ideal course environment is one in which all students feel a sense of belonging and that their points of view matter.[41] To encourage pedagogy that is conducive to belonging, inclusive instructors move away from teacher-centered instruction to learning-centered instruction, where instructors focus on the perspectives, experiences, interests, capacities, and needs of students. Barr notes that learning-centered instruction "establishes positive instructor-student relationships, fosters student self-efficacy, and strikes a balance between being challenging and being caring."[42] Instructors establish learning-centered instruction by promoting active participation through the co-construction of course expectations and through proactive reflection on the progress of those expectations. Inclusive instructors regularly reflect on how they are presenting knowledge and develop a practice of mindfulness that allows them to become aware of any harmful or invalidating behavior or misuse of power.[43] Ultimately, the relationship and rapport between students and instructors is the foundation upon which an inclusive course climate is built.

INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGY

Intercultural pedagogy refers to a range of teaching and curricular approaches that improve students' abilities to communicate and work across cultural, social, and personal differences. Inclusive instructors strive to cultivate a course climate that affirms the intellect of each student and fosters belonging and value of all identities, experiences, and backgrounds. In describing what she refers to as a "pedagogy of hope," hooks advocates for "bringing to the classroom pedagogical strategies that affirm [students'] presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics. This pedagogical strategy is rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience."[44] Engaging and building rapport with students are important elements in cultivating an inclusive course climate. Students are not only intellectual beings but also social and emotional beings; the interactions between these dimensions influence the learning and performance of each student.

The relationships among students also have implications on each student's overall experience of course climate. Instructors who foster diversity in the classroom design substantive and relevant opportunities for students to practice and refine communication skills and explore multiple points of view in diverse contexts.[45] University settings may be the first place where some students encounter a diversity of peers. Students individually bring with them socialized and indoctrinated beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing, all of which influence how they engage with learning spaces. To practice effective intercultural pedagogy, inclusive instructors encourage a positive student-to-student rapport that encourages the exploration and affirmation of identity and difference.

The aim of establishing an inclusive course climate cannot be to guarantee a "safe space," because learning spaces are not power-neutral or devoid of conflict.[46] Liberatory pedagogy seeks to name, address, and eradicate oppressive systems, which cannot be accomplished through disengagement. Inclusive instructors model positive interactions and demonstrate supportive interpersonal behaviors, such as praising moments of growth, intervening when microaggressions arise, addressing racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination, , and sharing appropriate and applicable personal stories or experiences.[47]

TEACHING STRATEGIES

1. **Become aware of any biases or stereotypes you may unconsciously hold.** Treat each student as an individuals with experiences associated with having intersecting social identities.[48] Inclusive instructors commit to their own self-examination, engaging in inner reflection on privilege, epistemology, and personal well-being so that they can empower and affirm each student from a place of wholeness (refer to *Principle 1*).

2. **Be attentive to terminology and model inclusive language, behavior, and attitudes.** Terminology that defines and speaks to the experiences of specific sociocultural groups and identities is ever changing and Inclusive instructors regularly seek opportunities to learn and re-learn about cultures to which they do not belong and the language that can be used to show respect toward them. An example of using inclusive language is avoiding gendered phrases, such as "guys" (instead, use "folks," "everyone," "students," or "learners") to address the class.

3. **Convey the same level of confidence in the abilities of all your students and be mindful of low-ability cues.** How instructors communicate and convey confidence in students' ability to perform academically is central to how each student experiences course climate. Students can have a sense of an instructor's attitude about their ability to perform due to the instructor's perception that they belong to a stigmatized group. Membership in a marginalized group can lead to students' underperforming due to stereotype threat, which "occurs when a student's anxieties about confirming a negative stereotype cause the student to perform poorly."[49] Instructors may inadvertently display messages rooted in bias and assumptions, for example, "I don't mind extending the deadline for you because I know students from urban schools struggle with the pace at Northwestern." Language like this, whether intentionally or unintentionally, promotes stereotype threat and diminishes students' self-efficacy. Therefore, inclusive instructors choose their words carefully and avoid microaggressions that may lead some students to not feel welcomed or included.

4. **Intentionally build in opportunities for students to share their names and pronouns with you and students.** One way to foster instructor immediacy, or connection, on the first day of class, is by letting students share their names with you and the rest of their peers. To collect, learn, and use their names you can:
   - Invite your students to display both their first names and pronouns on a name tent, which sits in front of students on their desk. Tents can be a low-cost option such as using cardstock or ones that are plastic and reusable.

- Communicate with your students using their first names in personalized emails via a mail merge tool. It is important to note that first names and pronouns on Canvas may not reflect the name and pronouns a student uses, hence amplifying the importance of a pre-survey to collect that information.
- Encourage your students to use each other's names when doing small group work (3-4 students) or active learning such as think-pair. This is a great opportunity to also use an icebreaker activity where students can ask one another about the origin of their names.
- Use student names when you move around the classroom or when students visit you in office hours. You will already know the student's name and can use it as an entry point to conversation that extends beyond course content.

5. **Structure opportunities for collaboration and interaction with peers.** Collaborative learning fosters intercultural competencies and grounds course material in a broader social context. Inclusive instructors explore diverse ways students can engage with one another, including collaborative project work, peer reviews, group research projects, group presentations, and facilitated dialogue and discussion. Try specific practices for structured collaborations and equitable group work:
   - Take into account students' commonalities and differences, such as noticing who sits regularly next to whom and then pairing and grouping students together who do not typically interact with each other.
   - Build in time checks for students to take turns speaking during small group discussions.
   - Provide instructions that clarify group work expectations in ways that students can self-facilitate individual and collective contributions and communicate if issues arise.
   - Incorporate individual self-assessments for how students are experiencing group work, as well as collectively interviewing and providing feedback on their planning and process to complete their assignment.
   - Give feedback to students may include suggesting group presentations incorporating every member's voice or asking questions about how they are communicating and sharing their workload.

6. **Facilitate and encourage group dialogue.** Dialogue and discussion are crucial tools for engaging in intercultural pedagogy. These methods activate experiential knowledge and allow students to practice listening, responding, and sharing their points of view. Model how to consider students' different points of view and emphasize the need for students to adopt the same behavior with their peers. Agreeing on co-constructed ground rules for discussion at the start of the term or before a dialogue is a way to mitigate anticipated conflicts (refer to *Principle 2*).

7. **Turn discord and tension into a learning opportunity.** Challenging moments are to be expected as students engage in active learning, and they offer students the opportunity to be vulnerable to the process of learning and expanding their personal perceptions. To transform discord into learning opportunities, you can:
   - Use care when discussing topics that may be sensitive in nature, including a content warning before the discussion begins, and explain why the topics are applicable to course material.
   - Be aware of interpersonal displays of discomfort, and explicitly address tensions early.

8. **Avoid microaggressions.** Sue and colleagues define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group." Microaggressions rooted in race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other sociocultural identities negatively affect students in these groups.[50] Offensive language reveals the biases and prejudices of the transgressor and severely affects the experience of the student who experiences it. Inclusive instructors take responsibility when they harm others, even unintentionally.
   - Listen, and reflect on what you hear. Give students space to make their full point before you respond.
   - Manage your feelings of defensiveness. It is okay to feel defensive, but that feeling is yours to manage, not another person's.
   - Take responsibility for harm with such phrases as "I'm sorry that what I said hurt you" and "I'm sorry I didn't handle that better."

9. **Intervene when microaggressions arise.** Inclusive instructors commit to intervening when students exhibit harmful behaviors. Microaggression intervention strategies recommended by Sue and colleagues include:
   - promoting empathy and pointing out commonality
   - differentiating between intent and impact
   - asking for clarification
   - describing what you observe is happening
   - appealing to the microaggression offenders' values and principles
   - carefully and sensitively redirecting or challenging the stereotype, using language absent of shaming

10. **Examine course content while crafting an inclusive curriculum:**
    - Assign course readings and texts that are gender inclusive and contextualized.
    - Assign course readings and texts that include scholarship and research by and about marginalized groups.
    - Discuss the contributions of historically underrepresented groups to your field of study.
    - Share how recent scholarship about race, gender, class, sexuality, and other identities is challenging and changing your field of study.
    - Enrich course materials by bringing in guest lecturers from other universities, including faculty and staff, or off-campus professionals with diverse sociocultural experiences.
    - Use multiple and diverse examples to support literature.

"Inclusive teaching can open up students to worlds in a classroom, allowing students to grow from whatever place they started. You can tell when students feel empowered and connected with material and want to share their experiences and insights. Engaging in this way takes bravery—but is more than worth it. I thrive in that environment, too.

I think of intentional inclusive teaching like setting up for a fun dinner party, with the right place settings, comfortable seating, and a diverse menu for different palates and diets. The prep and execution takes work, but then guests each have what they need at hand to enjoy and appreciate the food and the company. Ideally, we all walk away full and happy."

Mei-Ling Hopgood
William F. Thomas Professor, Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications

EXAMPLE

An instructor wishes to enable all students to feel a sense of belonging in an introductory STEM course that has a reputation for being challenging. After reading about inclusive pedagogy, the instructor decides to begin the course with a new exercise to help students relate their prior experience outside the classroom to the scientific method. In a survey prior to the first day of class, students are asked to describe a time they made a prediction about something, observed an outcome, and came to a conclusion about it. Student responses range from predictions about the quality of the cafeteria food and lab courses they had taken in high school to NFL Super Bowl wins. A small number of student responses are selected and presented on a slide on the first day of class to show students how they already have a great deal of experience in the universal process of scientific inquiry. The exercise demonstrates that students, with different backgrounds and experiences, approach problems differently. The instructor finds that the exercise fosters creative approaches to problems and can help students develop their identity as scientists and feel that their contributions to science matter. The instructor uses a poll and comments from CTECs to ensure that students feel that the class was inclusive and that students from all

FURTHER READING

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