

Inclusive Interaction and Communication in a Course

Diversity is about being invited to the dance. Inclusion is about being invited to dance.

Multicultural approaches, culturally-responsive practices, intercultural competence - one common denominator of all these buzzwords is “culture.” Any interaction between people is in many ways determined by their cultures, i.e. their ideas about reality and the world, their knowledge and ways of knowing, and their values and aesthetics. Thus, the first step toward thinking about anything intercultural or culturally-responsive is introspection, gaining consciousness of our own values and perspectives. From there, we can consider how we relate to others.

Here are short lists of aspects that can make a course and instructor/student interaction more inclusive. These lists are not comprehensive, but intended as sets of examples. Think of it as a buffet - visit it at times and pick a couple of items to focus and chew on for a while.

Environment and Context of Interaction:

Curriculum and Course Materials:

- Highlight contributions of diverse scholars and use sources of diverse authors, where appropriate. Invite diverse guest speakers so that students can experience a variety of role models.
- Question and articulate if data you use may be biased to certain population groups and discuss the implications thereof.
- Echo diverse identities, background, abilities, and perspectives in the case examples (e.g. choice of arbitrary names) and images you use. Avoid gendered pronouns that may reinforce stereotypes.
- Use multi-modal but accessible materials, e.g., combining textual and the video resources. Consult with DRC to explore how accessible your course materials are and where you can improve.
- Develop an accessible, easy-to-navigate course site (D2L or other) and provide an orientation to your students. Keep in mind that everyone uses D2L a little differently.

Creating a Context for Inclusive Learning:

- In your syllabus, explicitly state your teaching philosophy, your teaching strategies and the reasoning for your choices; this could be accomplished in the section on “course format.”
- Consider including a classroom climate policy in your syllabus and list ground rules (and expectations) for interaction and group work. Then model desired activities and behaviors in your first week of classes. Possibly, hold a conversation about group

behavior and respect; you might choose to develop ground rules together with your students.

- Use a random name generator or related strategies to ensure that you call on students of different genders, nationalities, etc. somewhat evenly. Almost everyone has an unconscious bias toward certain groups of students.
- Use the learning sciences to inform the design of your course, e.g., providing opportunities for metacognition, spaced retrieval practice, and interleaving. Compose specific, measurable learning outcomes and explicitly align your assessments to these.
- Share class-wide performance data with your students. Underrepresented students often have higher performance anxiety and can be reassured with data.
- Use Intelligence Agents in D2L to reach out to students in a timely manner. Reach out to both, high performing and low-performing students around midterm. Words of acknowledgment and/or encouragement go a long way.

Communication:

“Presence” or “immediacy” are buzzwords used to describe the perceived closeness of interactions and relationships. The key is behavior that reduces the psychological distance between people, which has a positive effect on both affective and cognitive levels of learning. It often increases instructor credibility and student motivation for learning.

Instructor Presence:

- Tell your students occasionally that you acknowledge their efforts and hard work and that you enjoy working with them.
- Stress approachability as it applies to you, e.g., how and when students can reach out to you (email, office hour, talking before or after class). Make clear what channels of communication will be used and for what purposes (e.g., Announcements in D2L). In online courses, use video to promote a sense of your presence, but ensure that the most pertinent information is also available in text.
- In presenting, use an open body language, strive for articulation and intonation, a moderate speed of speaking, and sufficient volume. (Tip: If teaching in person, ask an observer or record a few minutes of your first class.)
- Inclusive language: Try to learn and use student names as much as possible; refer to people by the terms (names, pronouns) they choose. Use person-first language and honor people’s autonomy, e.g. “a women who is blind,” or “a child who uses a wheelchair.” Consider the effect of word choices for diverse audiences (e.g., the effect of “guys” on transgender people). Please keep in mind that inclusive language may be situational and evolves over time.
- If a student brings a perceived issue to your attention, listen fully to the claim without responding defensively. Justified or, not, it takes courage to speak up. Acknowledge the feedback you receive and allow yourself time to reflect on it. If appropriate, address it with the class and use it as a learning opportunity.

Student Presence:

- The scholarship shows that well-designed cooperative/collaborative learning promotes inclusiveness and learning success. Use icebreakers and group work early on so that students can learn names. Consider forming deliberate groups of students for group work over longer periods during the semester, e.g., changing groups every 3 or 4 weeks.
- Use IT tools to promote a sense of presence. Students can use D2L VideoNote and audio in Discussions and Assignments. Consider adopting tools such as VoiceThread to enable asynchronous, online communication that allows for text, audio, and video. This can be used for interactive lecturing, discussions, group work, case studies, exams, etc.
- Inclusive Language: Foster conversation about the parameters of inclusive language with your students and address the implications of interactions online. Provide or develop a “netiquette” statement with your students. Actively intervene if students may intimidate each other with jargon.
- Gather informal student feedback, for instance through an initial needs survey, a mid semester student feedback survey, or reflection questions attached to assignments. Allows students to influence how the course design evolves.

Resources:

The Office of Instruction and Assessment (oia.arizona.edu) provides one-on-one consultations as well as resources and professional development events around the practice of Inclusive Excellence in teaching:

- OIA Mini-Primers (web resources): “Inclusive Excellence in Teaching” & “Improving Verbal and Nonverbal Communication with Students Online and Face to Face”
- OIA Tutorial “Teaching Diverse Students” (self-enrolled, self-paced online tutorial in D2L)
- OIA Mini-Course “Building Communities in Online Courses” (five-day online mini-course; specific dates)

The Office of Diversity and Inclusive Excellence (diversity.arizona.edu) offers many resources and references.

Vanderbilt University has a great online resource on “Increasing Inclusivity in the Classroom” (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/increasing-inclusivity-in-the-classroom/>)

AAC&U has a great set of rubrics that address intercultural competence, oral and written communication, teamwork, and civic engagement, for instance. These rubrics are designed to serve as resources that you can use and customize in any form or shape. (<https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>)