

Effective Instructional Practice: Realizing an Inclusive Classroom

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Due to the globalized nature of U.S. higher education, encountering students with racial, ethnic, national, and other identity differences in the classroom settings is inevitable. As Martin, Nakayama, and Flores (2002) postulated, “we live in a world of increasing intercultural and international contacts. Sometimes these interactions are on an interpersonal level; sometimes they occur in organizational settings or political arenas” (p. 3). As educational and cultural spaces, classrooms do not exist in isolation, and (in principle) they are supposed to reflect the makeup of our society; however, in actuality, they often do not mirror society’s cultural complexities and diversity, thus making inclusivity a difficult goal to achieve.

To address this problem, institutions of higher education across the country have begun to implement diversity initiatives. However, inclusivity encompasses more than having a range of bodies and cultures being represented in the classroom. Corbett and Slee (2000) argued that “inclusive education is an unabashed announcement, a public and political declaration and celebration of difference . . . it requires continual proactive responsiveness to foster an inclusive educational culture” (p. 134). Thus, inclusivity in the classroom incorporates the inclusion of (a) diverse bodies and their experiences, (b) different teaching styles to educate students with divergent backgrounds and educational needs, (c) class content that aims to represent students’ distinct lived experiences and ideological foundations, and (d) non-dominant epistemologies.

Realizing an inclusive classroom is important for three reasons. First, extant

literature indicates that inclusion fosters the development of student cognitive outcomes such as problem-solving skills, cognitive growth, and cognitive complexity (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2014). Second, inclusion efforts have positive effects on students' social outcomes. For example, researchers have found that fostering inclusion helps students develop cross-racial friendships and experience positive interracial interactions (Bowman & Park, 2014; Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006; Denson & Chang, 2015). Third, fostering inclusion in the classroom can help reduce intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Creating inclusivity and maintaining culturally diverse classroom settings, though possible, are sometimes difficult to achieve. Instructors often overlook or disregard diversity as part of their course or curriculum design (Hendrix, 2010). For example, taking a White, Euro-American perspective (although not often named as such, it is the assumed normal or neutral perspective) is one of the primary barriers to achieving inclusivity. Institutional and departmental commitment and support (e.g., financial) toward inclusivity often do not match the needs for developing inclusion in the classroom. In fact, the lack of financial and ideological commitments to achieving inclusivity can emerge as one of the more damaging barriers to inclusivity (Ashe Higher Education Report, 2012). Students also may resist efforts toward inclusivity due to the differences that exist in their political, ideological, or religious backgrounds. These differences often discourage students from participating in discussions, particularly those discussions that address diversity (Ashe Higher Education Report; Taras & Rowney, 2007).

Three Tips for Realizing an Inclusive Classroom

1. To realize inclusivity and cultivate empathy, respect, and understanding toward cultural diversity, faculty members must be fully committed to the idea of creating spaces for students that affirm non-dominant identity markers, lived experiences, comfort levels, and abilities. This commitment requires conscious efforts to employ classroom activities and assignments that not only encourage students to understand the purpose of inclusivity, but also to embody it in their interactions within and outside of the classroom (Alexander, 2004; Landis & Bhagat, 1995; Sobre, 2017). Without these efforts, inclusivity will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

2. Faculty members who are committed to achieving inclusivity in the classroom must create course content that reflects a wide range of perspectives, particularly marginalized community knowledge. One way to do so is to design the course content to mirror national and international diversity, thus allowing all students to see themselves in the curriculum or the class material. For example, incorporating essays, memoirs, stories, films, and art created by both non-white and non-American scholars, authors, and artists may help students to meaningfully experience new ways of viewing themselves and the world. Furthermore, developing assignments that require different learning and linguistic skills and creative abilities would allow students of color, other minority students, and international students to express their voices and share their stories in the classroom.

3. Faculty should employ a range of teaching styles with students who learn differently or use English as their second language. The Universal Design movement offers a great deal of resources for ensuring that classrooms are inclusive of traditionally underserved students (e.g., Burgstahler, 2015). For example, incorporating online

discussion boards into a course could facilitate participation from those students who are shy, who might not have a high level of English proficiency, or feel threatened by their classmates (Hao, 2011). Using visual materials (e.g., films, documentaries, websites) to teach the course content also would allow students to discover aspects of themselves in the course material and could also help students to contextualize some of the course materials in the form of storytelling.

Assessing the Realization of Inclusion

There are two interrelated ways to assess inclusion. The first way is to rely on in-class discussions on inclusivity and the artifacts (e.g., films, television shows, poetry, stories) that were used in the course. Instructors should not look for students to parrot diversity rhetoric or simply summarize the artifact they read or watched; rather, instructors should identify whether students from a range of identity positions sensitively and positively interact with one another, even if they disagree. The second way is to collect personal reflections from students in order to gauge feedback. Instructors should ask students to write a 1-2 page ungraded reflection essay about their ideas on classroom inclusion and their role in cultivating it, which instructors then can use to inform their pedagogical decisions (e.g., redesign the course syllabus, create new or alternative assignments, promote in-class discussions on diversity and inclusion).

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