Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning
Digital Learning • Teaching Excellence

Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Tips and Strategies

Prepared by the Doing What Matters Working Group for Diversity and Inclusion
https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/teaching/creating-inclusive-classrooms

George Mason University takes pride in the diversity of our university community. We aim to create an environment at Mason, in our classrooms and beyond, that is inclusive, inspirational, and focused on the needs of those we serve. Mason faculty are encouraged to adopt and adapt strategies for pedagogical inclusivity that fit with their courses and discipline.

Why engage in inclusive pedagogies?

"Even though some of us might wish to conceptualize our classrooms as culturally neutral or might choose to ignore the cultural dimensions, students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door, nor can they instantly transcend their current level of development…. Therefore, it is important that the pedagogical strategies we employ in the classroom reflect an understanding of social identity development so that we can anticipate the tensions that might occur in the classroom and be proactive about them" (Ambrose *et. al.,* 2010, p. 169-170).

Attentiveness to social identity development is important on any campus and in any context; however, it is particularly important at Mason for two reasons:

1. The wide-ranging diversity of our student body (race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, age, ability status, veteran status, first generation, non-native speakers, immigration status, etc.) and

2. Relative to our student body, the lack of diversity among our instructional faculty.

A large body of research on inclusive teaching suggests that inclusive pedagogies are effective and that learning outcomes for students are improved when **all** students feel visible, valued, safe, and welcomed in the classroom.

How can I demonstrate inclusive values?

1. Share with your students that you value creating an inclusive learning experience to support their learning. One way to do this is to have a diversity statement on your syllabus that you discuss the first week of class. Examples include the Women and Gender Studies Diversity/Inclusion statement and the School of Integrative Studies Celebrating our Diversity statement.

2. Make sure that your syllabus is written in non-sexist, gender inclusive terms. For example, use the phrase first year student versus freshman, humankind rather than mankind, etc.

3. Acknowledge the unseen. Students are diverse in ways that may not be visible (e.g., race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, disabilities, and more).

4. Use an interfaith calendar of religious holidays when planning tests, assignments, or project due dates.

5. Make the effort to ensure that everyone can pronounce each others' names—faculty and students—correctly. Some faculty find it useful to use notecards or table tents with phonetic spelling. On a globally minded campus, this honors everyone's cultural identity.

6. Strive for inclusive language that does not assume Eurocentric name forms. For example, use family name rather than last name or given name versus Christian name.

7. Ask students to share what name and pronoun is consistent with their gender identity and expression and then honor that information.

8. Establish rules and guidelines for an inclusive and respectful classroom.

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## How can I embrace inclusion and diversity in course content?

1. Develop classroom materials that explore multiple perspectives and experiences.

2. Adopt texts and learning materials (whether books, articles, films, multimedia or digital objects) that are written or created in gender-neutral and stereotype-free terms.

3. Adopt readings that explore diverse gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and/or political viewpoints, etc.

4. Develop critical perspectives on texts that include discriminatory language.

5. When writing test and quiz questions and creating or adopting assignments—case studies, word problems, scenarios, etc.—use examples that showcase inclusivity with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, individuals' names, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.

How can I practice inclusive teaching?

1. Foster equity and accessibility from the first day of class by making sure that all students understand the basic elements of academic literacy (reading the syllabus closely, what office hours are and why they can benefit students, etc.) as well as the particularities of your course (assignment structures, how they should contact you, utilizing Blackboard or other required technological tools, policies concerning attendance, participation, and grading).

2. When lecturing, avoid exclusionary phrases such as, "Everyone knows…," "It is easy to imagine…," or "Certainly the answer is obvious…." These phrases assume a shared cultural context and can function to silence or discourage students from asking questions.

3. Avoid assuming that all students will recognize cultural, literary or historical references familiar to you.

4. Listen for and respond to racist, sexist, homophobic, or insensitive comments. Be aware that faculty set the tone in the classroom and students may assume faculty agree with or do not care about the impact of the problematic comments that are dismissed or ignored.

5. If a difficult classroom conversation develops based on challenging, sensitive, or uncomfortable topics, pause. Faculty can "hit pause" on the conversation and encourage students to write down their thoughts about the topic. Pausing can allow students and faculty to think, reflect, and consider thoughtful responses.

6. Be aware of your own identities, experiences, beliefs, and stereotypes and how you "show up" in the classroom.

7. Assess your conscious and unconscious biases about students based on dress, surname, gender, or race. If you are interested, Harvard University's Project Implicit has a range of brief tests designed to assess implicit bias for many issues, including race, sexual orientation, weight, religion, disability, skin-tone, and more. [See: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/)]

8. Assume that no student can speak as a representative of their race or culture.

Reference: Ambrose, Susan A.. (Eds.) (2010) How learning works: seven research-based principles for smart teaching. San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass.

NOTE: Please see the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning website for hyperlinks to referenced items and additional resources: **https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/teaching/creating-inclusive-classrooms; http://stearnscenter.gmu.edu**
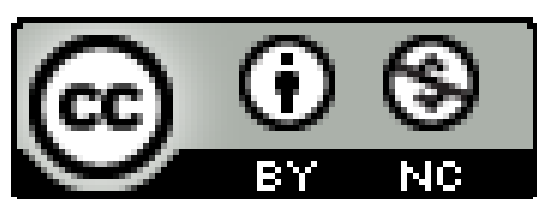
How might you apply these ideas, tips & best practices to a course you are currently teaching?

What additional information or resources might you need in order to try it?

For info and guidance, please contact the Stearns Center for Teaching & Learning (4th Floor, Innovation Hall)

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