

MODULE 2:

Creating and maintaining inclusive classroom communities

Discussions about inclusive classrooms begin with a frame of mind and a deep-seated understanding that inclusion is at the core of an educational journey. In addition to teaching the content and skills specific to our disciplines, our role as college professors is to help our students—all of our students—to learn and thrive. All members of an inclusive classroom should be provided access to an educational environment where they can freely and safely listen and speak.

Regardless if you believe that higher education can be “the great equalizer,” it is clear that truly inclusive teaching takes work. Inclusive teaching puts the onus on instructors to recognize our students as young adults with varied life experiences and learning challenges. This module provides ideas for creating classrooms that accommodate our diverse students by identifying some of the important characteristics of inclusive college classrooms and discussing welcoming and respectful listening and speaking.

Learning objectives

1. Define inclusive classrooms and their core role in an educational journey
2. Discuss some important characteristics of inclusive teaching
3. Identify techniques to interrupt bias and discriminatory language in the classroom learning environment

Inclusive college classrooms and their core role in an educational journey

Teaching inclusively requires embracing the diversity among our students, which includes but is not limited to their race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, religion, political ideologies, disabilities, and first-generation status. In addition to their diversity, college students enter our classes with diverse learning differences, educational and professional preparation for college, and language backgrounds.

The diverse demographics and personal experiences students bring to our classrooms all provide the potential for more nuanced class discussions. This diversity also challenges us as instructors. When making a decision related to our teaching, we should ask ourselves if any of our students will be disenfranchised by our choices. For example:

- If a student with a documented processing issue retreats during a graded in-class debate while other students find the fast pace exciting, is the student’s participation grade lowered on this activity? Are they provided an opportunity to improve their grade through a differently formatted assignment?
- If a classroom simulation requires students to be assigned roles that symbolize underrepresented populations, are these roles assigned randomly or is there careful consideration as to the roles

assigned to students of color, religious minorities, women, and first-generation students in your classes?

- If American English idioms such as, “thinking outside the box,” or “hitting the nail on the head,” are used in a lecture, class discussion, or assigned reading or film, are you making sure to define them so that students who are not first language English speakers can equitably understand the material?

One important question we need to ask ourselves is: *As professors, are we viewing the success of our students as central to the success of our own teaching?*

A welcoming and structured learning environment

Undergraduate students thrive in a structured classroom environment where the syllabus, assignments, and grading mechanisms are driven by clear learning objectives. As faculty, we need to ensure that our teaching methodology, assigned texts and film resources, and assessments are all universally designed with the diversity of our learners in mind. We should not view this scaffolding as hand-holding, but instead as an element of inclusion in our teaching practices. Students who are most at need benefit disproportionately from structure, and those who do not require as much structure are not harmed by its presence in our teaching.

Inclusive environments also welcome all who enter our physical and virtual learning environments, including the teaching assistants, faculty members, guest speakers, and perspective-students who might be visiting. The audio/visual technicians who set up and fix the technology in our classrooms and the staff who clean our spaces should be included in this welcoming environment as well. As faculty members, we are responsible for modeling and normalizing an open and respectful environment for our students.

Important characteristics of inclusive teaching

There are shared characteristics that can be seen across inclusive college classrooms, regardless of the subject matter being taught. These elements include teaching speaking and listening skills, interrupting offensive language and faulty assumptions made by students in class, taking time to connect with students on a personal level, and being willing to pivot in our teaching methods if we find they are not working for our students. Although this list is in no way exhaustive, here are five important elements of inclusive teaching:

Listening deeply when others speak

We should be teaching our students what active listening means in the classroom. College students who listen thoughtfully to their peers can strengthen relationships and friendships. They can also grow to appreciate how their classmates might approach the course material differently than they do. Students who are trained to listen to their classmates create a place where people feel safe to share their opinions and offer suggestions in an environment built on trust.

As instructors, we should model thoughtful listening for our students. We should explain that one of the greatest barriers to communication is listening to reply, rather than listening to understand. Encouraging listening skills in class is not always an easy task. It takes effort for our college students to quiet their own

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thoughts in order to really hear what others are saying. If we add structure to our teaching by not allowing students to raise their hands when a classmate is speaking, for example, we are taking steps toward inclusive listening behavior. It's important to remind our students of the appreciation and respect we all feel when we are heard without distractions.

Identifying needed improvements in our teaching

Regularly asking our students for feedback in writing and in person is important so that we can grow as educators and continue to make sure our classrooms are as inclusive as possible for all students. By finding out what activities and teaching methods work best for the students in our class, you'll be able to increase student engagement for many different kinds of learners. For example, a mistake many faculty members make is to routinely lecture through an entire class meeting. The intent is a positive one: after all, isn't it our job to cover as much detailed material as possible in the limited time we have with our students? If we receive feedback from our students about our classes being too lecture-heavy, perhaps we should be questioning our techniques: how will our students really understand the material if all they have done is listen?

Most typically, instructor evaluations are distributed at the end of the semester, leaving little room for improvement in our teaching. By asking students for regular feedback throughout the semester, we'll be able to troubleshoot methods that are not working for all learners and create activities and assignments that are more inclusive. Grades and test scores don't tell the whole story of a student's success in our courses; by asking our student how well our teaching fits their abilities as learners, we can continue to adjust our instruction to better meet student needs.

Respecting silence

Silence is critical, both as a teaching technique and as a mechanism to help students process new information and gather their individual thoughts and opinions. Some students are more focused on actively participating in class discussions than they are in listening to others. In addition, quieter students might prematurely accept the ideas of their more extraverted peers before considering their own. An inclusive classroom uses purposeful silence to benefit all students.

Professors are sometimes concerned about "wasting" precious class time in silence. Others feel that even a few minutes of silence in a classroom feels like an uncomfortable eternity. But short silences, especially following the presentation of difficult material, or after a heated class discussion is a tool used by many seasoned educators. Simply stating, *"Let's take two minutes to think or write silently, and then we'll break into small discussion groups/return to the larger class discussion"* will most often generate richer dialogue.

Recognizing the humanity in others

Taking time to connect with our students on a personal and emotional level will show them that they are valued and worthy. To the extent we are comfortable, it's important that we share both challenging and joyous stories from our own lives with them. We should feel comfortable letting our students know what is important to us, both inside and outside the classroom.

Using students' chosen names (pronounced correctly) and preferred pronouns; acknowledging stressful times in their lives, on campus, or in the larger society; asking how they are feeling after they have been ill; and sending a quick note to express concern if their behavior in class seems "off" are all crucial to building trusting,

caring relationships. Modeling the concern we show to our students should, in turn, help them to see us as humans with responsibilities, passions, families, feelings, and emotions.

Speaking only your truth

There is a difference between speaking your truth and speaking the truth, and we should teach this distinction to our students. We should encourage our students to confidently share their own voices in class. It's our job as faculty members to remind our students to speak only for themselves, however, not for a larger group in which they are a member, and certainly not for others.

As professors, we should also model the importance of asking about the experiences of others rather than making assumptions about their lives. Hearing others' answers to the questions we pose (sometimes preceded by asking them if we may ask these questions), is the clearest and most honest way of learning about other individuals' thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences—in their own words.

Interrupting bias and discriminatory language in the classroom learning environment

Inclusive teaching includes holding ourselves and our students accountable for the words and the opinions they share. It also means teaching our students to hold themselves and their peers accountable and to apologize for their own hurtful speech. Both conflicts between individuals sharing dissenting opinions and the use of offensive language by a student are to be expected in our college classrooms. Although often uncomfortable, these incidents are an appropriate part of college-level learning. If we can manage these situations well, they can be excellent ways for students to grow.

Faculty self-reflection and education

It's important to ask ourselves why so many of us are uncomfortable in the presence of a person expressing a high level of emotional intensity in a classroom setting. As faculty, we want our students to be passionate and engaged, so what is it that scares us? When we hear a student say something that may be hurtful or discriminatory to a peer, to us, or to a specific group of people, what is our reaction? Facilitating inclusive classroom discussion means that we have thought through some of these possible classroom scenarios and have made a plan to address the situation at hand.

Inclusive classrooms also require faculty to educate ourselves on the classroom biases reported by the students across the university who feel marginalized on our particular campus. This includes microaggressions—verbal or behavioral indignities which communicate racial or ethnic antagonism, whether intentional or unintentional. We must remember that a learning environment which a student perceives as hostile can dramatically and negatively affect their ability to learn and thrive on campus.

A step-by-step plan for interrupting bias

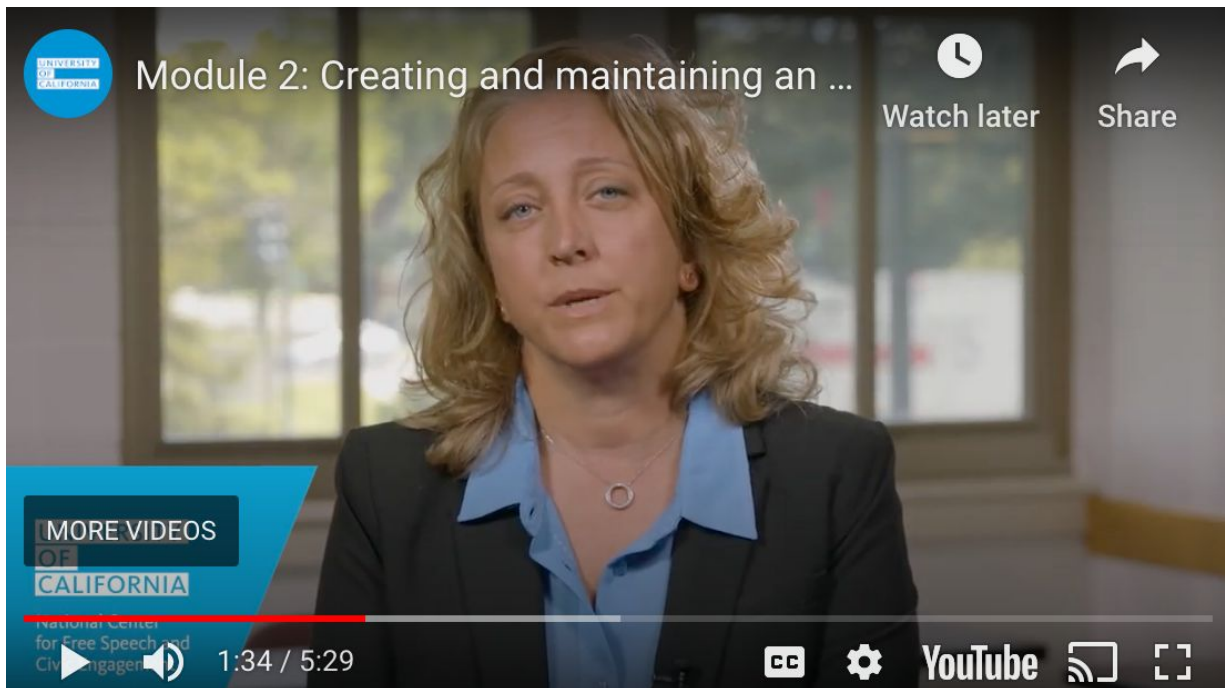
Do you have a plan to respond if a student in your class makes a sexist, racist, or homophobic remark? Are you ready to act quickly and provide a teachable moment so that communication does not shut down? These can be some of the most difficult and important teaching moments of a semester. Handle it wrong (or not at all)

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and our authority in the class can be significantly compromised. Handle it appropriately, and we model an appropriate response in a profoundly meaningful manner.

Many colleges and universities have created guidelines for their instructors to interrupt bias when it arises in the classroom. Here is a user-friendly resource which can be applied in varied college classroom settings. It was created by the Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives at Michigan State University in 2018 and adapted by many U.S. colleges and universities.

- **Quickly pause the conversation** after you have heard a biased, disturbing, or offensive word or comment from a student (with “wait a second” or “excuse me”) to let the speaker know that you’re interested in learning more about something they just said. Make sure to keep your focus on the student(s) who verbalized the offensive language. Most importantly, be willing to shift from your scheduled teaching plan for the sake of our students learning from the experience.
- **Ask the speaker(s) for clarification** (with, “what I hear you saying is”) to let the speaker(s) know what you think you heard them say. This returns the power in the situation back to the student, offers them a minute to gather their thoughts, and gives them the floor to more clearly explain their language or what they meant to express, and perhaps offer an apology.
- **Listen carefully to their response in an engaged manner.** Give the speaker(s) an opportunity to correct your interpretation and/or apologize for the offensive language. Make sure to use eye contact, observe your body language, and interrupt the speaker only for further clarification.
- **Speak with confidence, describing your objection to what was said.** Explain why the language was offensive to you, with the goal of educating, not embarrassing the student(s). Within your comfort level, share your own experiences or learning related to the offensive term or biased opinion. Students are often moved to consider other perspectives when they hear the personal experiences of their professors and mentors.
- **Follow up** with the student or group who was offended or potentially offended. Reach out privately by conversation, email, or phone following the class. Ask for their opinion about the in-class experience and their interpretation as to how the interaction was handled. Offer the opportunity for further follow-up and confirm that they feel comfortable, included, and heard in your classroom environment.



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