

Setting the Tone for an Inclusive Classroom: Some Practices to Consider

In any discipline, instructors can take deliberate steps to ensure that all students feel welcomed and valued as part of the learning community. The following five general practices can be adapted to create an intentionally inclusive environment in any class.

1. Establish clear expectations and goals for classroom interactions.

- Provide discussion guidelines, or collaboratively generate them with your students. See examples at crlt.umich.edu/examples-discussion-guidelines.
- Highlight the importance of respecting others' perspectives, avoiding generalizations, and being careful not to ask other students to 'represent' or speak on behalf of a whole group you perceive them to belong to.
- Clarify the instructor's and students' respective roles in shaping and guiding discussion. What are their responsibilities, what are yours? When and why might these shift?
- Clarify your pedagogical aims for the ways students will consider course material relative to their own lived experiences. When, how much, and in what ways are students encouraged to share from their own experiences?

2. Build rapport and community in your class.

- Learn students' names (and their correct pronunciations), use them, and encourage other students to use them. In large classes, this could include using name cards or nametags for at least the first several meetings.
- Use icebreakers throughout the semester. These can be activities or questions that are directly pertinent to course learning goals but give students opportunities to share from their individual experience.
- Incorporate peer learning in your class, using pairs and groups in meaningful ways to enhance learning and provide practice with key skills and concepts.
- Give students regular opportunities to reflect upon ways their learning has been enhanced by interaction with classmates. This could be as simple as asking them to reflect on their learning at the end of a session with the question, "What did you learn from someone else in today's class?"

3. Model inclusive language that acknowledges student differences.

- On your syllabus: Include a statement inviting students to speak with you about necessary accommodations for physical or learning disabilities. Include a note about the University policy on religious holidays. Refer to breaks by their seasonal names (e.g., "winter break," not "Christmas break").
- While speaking in class, mark as particular to only *some* students' experiences that many may assume are shared by *all* (e.g., living in a house, being cared for by two parents, regularly taking vacations). You can use phrases such as, "For those of you who have been on an airplane," or "If you grew up with siblings to whom you were biologically related..." This can help normalize and destigmatize experiences that are possible points of marginalization for your students.

- On group assignments that require meeting outside of class, remind students that some classmates will need to schedule around commitments such as work, religious practice, or family obligations. Propose ways to overcome transportation hurdles for those without access to a car.

4. Help students develop awareness of multiple visible and invisible identities in the classroom. This can take pressure off underrepresented students to play the role of those who “have” race, sexual orientation, a disability, etc.

- Carefully choose your examples (for illustrating course concepts) to be meaningful to students with a range of backgrounds, and acknowledge that not all students will share the same points of reference. For instance, if you’re using a sports example or analogy, you might acknowledge possible international backgrounds by prefacing it with, “In this example, “football” means U.S. football, not what Americans call soccer...”
- Where comfortable and appropriate to course material, use your own identities to explain how one’s background can affect one’s engagement with course material, especially if there are ways you can complicate or unsettle common expectations.
- Invite everyone in the room to think about how their experience has been shaped by their identities. For instance: In turning to course content that raises questions about sexuality, you might launch discussion by asking students to reflect individually on: “Do you have a label for your sexual orientation? Where did you learn it? Why do you use it? Do you label your sexuality differently in different settings? How permanent or true do those labels feel?” Similar questions could be asked about other social identities. The importance here is that all students think about the same questions.

5. Address tensions or problematic patterns of interaction. This can help prevent conflicts from escalating and normalize respectful, productive disagreement in the classroom.

- Name uncomfortable moments as such. You might say, “This topic is clearly raising some discomfort. I want to acknowledge that as we move into talking about it further.” Or “I sense a lot of big emotion in the room right now. Let’s figure out why this subject /these comments are having such an impact.”
- If necessary, remind students of class discussion guidelines and expectations for respectful classroom interactions.
- Respectfully challenge student comments when they marginalize or devalue another group’s or student’s perspective or experience. You might say, “Let’s consider what perspectives that generalization leaves out.” Or “You might not realize how those words sound, but here’s what I hear when you say them...”
- Periodically ask students to share anonymous feedback about classroom dynamics or to reflect individually on their own participation patterns.