Crafting Inclusive Classrooms

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Introduction to Crafting Inclusive Classrooms

Continue Learning

Include Multiple Perspectives on Each Topic

Model Inclusive Language

Refrain from Tokenizing Individuals

Challenge Assumptions and Recognize Implicit Biases

Avoid Penalizing Highly-Visible Students

Learn to Welcome Feedback

Use the Language Others Use for Themselves

Learn to Navigate Conflict

Learn About Differences in Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Normalize Pronoun Sharing

Challenge Notions of Heteronormativity and Cissexism

Be Aware of Gender Dynamics in Classroom Discussions

Make a Genuine Effort to Learn Students’ Names

Avoid Tone Policing

Provide Captions or Transcripts

Utilize Course Website Options

Consider Using Open Educational Resources to Cut Costs for Students

Be Aware of Concrete Course Time Commitments Outside of Class

Be Mindful of Non-Christian Holidays
Employ Methods of Universal Design for Learning

Introduction to Crafting Inclusive Classrooms

Our work in Boise State University’s Gender Equity Center brings us to many departments and classrooms, and one of the questions we are most frequently asked is “how can I make my workplace/classroom/space more welcoming for LGBTQIA+ students?” Within the Gender Equity Center we try to approach our work from an intersectional framework, meaning that we recognize the importance of a person’s whole identity and try not to focus solely on the fact they identify within the LGBTQIA+ community. We recognize that a person should not be reduced to any one aspect of their identity, and in doing this we broadened the question: “how can we make our campus more welcoming for our historically underserved students?” This guide is a living document that seeks to answer at least some of the question at hand, and provides our faculty with some ideas as a starting point to better serve our students. While many of these ideas can be applied to other aspects of life and interpersonal interactions, this guide is primarily meant for educators and should be viewed as such.

When working to create an inclusive classroom, there are many resources you can reference and use, both on-campus and abroad. Below are a handful of our on-campus departments that are available to help create more inclusive classrooms.

On-Campus Resources:
- Boise State Uniting for Inclusion and Leadership in Diversity certificate program
- Center for Teaching and Learning
- Educational Access Center
- Gender Equity Center
- International Student Services
- Multicultural Student Services
- Student Diversity and Inclusion

Continue Learning

The best way to begin constructing an inclusive classroom and better connect with your students is to pursue a lifetime of learning. Continuing to learn about different opinions, experiences, identities, and lifeways will inform the way you structure your curriculum and change the way that you think about different topics.

While this guide contains a number of resources that you may use as a starting point, we encourage you to seek additional opportunities.
Include Multiple Perspectives on Each Topic

Oftentimes, the histories that we are taught are half-factual, biased accounts of events that have occurred. Histories are frequently written by the victors, and the victors are frequently the oppressors of various groups. Learning about the perspectives of groups that have identities you don’t share is important in creating an inclusive space of any sort.

When structuring your courses, check your reading lists and course content. In discussions of Indigenous peoples, do you include any materials from Indigenous authors or their perspectives? Does your biology curriculum ignore the existence of intersex individuals and focus on only one of the many aspects of sex? Are concepts generated in communities of color within your curriculum incorrectly attributed to a white man? Are the only thoughts about science coming from a euro-centric perspective? If multiple perspectives are not included, why is that?

Resources:

- [Exploring Indigenous and Western Approaches to Natural Resources Research from Humboldt State University](#)

Model Inclusive Language

Many everyday words and phrases have unfortunate connotations and histories, and may actively exclude individuals from the conversation based on race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other factors. Modeling inclusive language in everyday life and in the classroom shows that you are taking all sorts of students into consideration during classroom instruction.

Resources:

- [Boise State University’s Inclusive Excellence Communications Guide](#)
- [Inclusive Language from the University of Oregon](#)
- [Inclusive Language Guide from The Rocky Mountain Collegian](#)
- [A Guide to Inclusive Language in the Workplace from Idealist](#)

Refrain from Tokenizing Individuals

“Tokenism” is a practice of performative inclusion where one member of a minority is used as a symbol of inclusion within a classroom, workplace, or movement. This may manifest as asking someone to speak on behalf of everyone with one identity or singling out an individual to speak on experiences that they may or may not have based on perceptions of their identity. Forcing a visibly Muslim student to speak about the five pillars of Islam or jihad is tokenism. Singling out a Black student to describe Jim Crow laws or the civil rights movement is tokenism. Tokenization may leave someone feeling dehumanized, stereotyped, and marginalized.
“Inspiration porn” is tangentially related to tokenization. Inspiration porn is a term used to describe the way people without disabilities view the everyday functions of people with disabilities as “inspirational.” Inspiration porn also has a tendency to focus on activities that are necessary to the survival of the individual, and reduces that person to their disability. A similar phenomenon can be seen with refugees, people who are homeless, members of the military, and other groups of people who are doing what it takes to survive, but to consider them an inspiration would be inappropriate.

Instead of forcing students into conversations about their identities, allow each student to speak about their own identities and experiences in their own time.

Resources:
- What is Inspiration Porn? [CC] from Annie Elainey

**Challenge Assumptions and Recognize Implicit Biases**

Everyone, regardless of the identities, holds implicit biases. These biases may be positive or negative and affect various social identity characteristics such as race, ability, sexuality, gender, religious affiliation, age, and appearance. These biases do not immediately make us bad people, but it is important to recognize them and understand how they affect our day-to-day operations and how we interact with others.

Initial assumptions about others based on their social identity characteristics may also be informed by implicit biases and may come up in interactions with others. Self-reflection is essential in personal growth. There are a number of resources to help you identify and reflect on implicit biases, and actively recognizing and challenging those biases and assumptions helps to promote a positive classroom environment. Acknowledging that one does indeed have implicit biases is the first step to ensuring they do not become a hindrance. Having open and honest conversations about those biases is another good starting point. Consider taking implicit bias workshops to help work through different ways of challenging your biases.

Resources:
- Understanding Implicit Bias from the Ohio State University
- Take a Test from Harvard University
- Strategies to Address Unconscious Bias from University of California, San Francisco
- Overcoming Implicit Bias from Teachers Workshop
Avoid Penalizing Highly-Visible Students

Some students may have characteristics, such as a way of dress, mobility aid, or racial characteristics, that make them more visible in the classroom when compared to other students. This may lead to these students being unfairly penalized for absences while other students are able to slip by without notice. “Majority students” may be able to show up late to class on occasion, while the same courtesy may not be extended to these highly visible students. If keeping attendance for your classes, ensure that you are tracking the attendance of every student instead of a select few. Consider transferring to a system that counts participation rather than attendance, with different ways of documenting a student’s participation and engagement with the course material.

Some assignments may, by design, bar highly visible students from writing about their own experiences or culture (i.e Muslim women who wear headscarves writing about Islam, foreign exchange students writing about their home countries) while other students with less visible identities (i.e. Christian women, American-born students) are welcome to write about theirs. Avoid placing restrictions on highly-visible students, and instead, offer the same opportunities to all students.

Learn to Welcome Feedback

Receiving feedback in any form is a gift and an opportunity to learn and broaden your perspectives. Learning to explicitly welcome and accept feedback and implement solutions is vital in creating an inclusive classroom.

Resources:

- Receiving and Giving Effective Feedback from the University of Waterloo

Use the Language Others Use for Themselves

By learning and familiarizing yourself with language that communities use to describe themselves, you can create safer environments for students. It is most appropriate to use people-first language in general situations, but there are people who prefer other terms or labels in one-on-one situations. For example, in lectures, it is appropriate to use the phrase "people with disabilities" but an individual student may prefer you to use "disabled person.” Some individuals may identify with the term “queer,” but many people within the LGBTQIA+ community are uncomfortable with the term and prefer not to be referred to as such. It is not appropriate to ask these questions to students, it should be information they have the option of giving you. Many educators have begun asking for this information prior to or on the first day of classes in the form of a class survey or an email sent out to their students. These questionnaires often contain questions about names and pronouns, but may have questions about other aspects of a student’s
life including academic interests and hobbies. Give students an opportunity to share their expectations for the class and any other information they would like you to know about themselves.

Resources:
- Why Person-First Language Doesn’t Always Put the Person First from Think Inclusive
- Gender Pronouns from Trans Student Educational Resources

Learn to Navigate Conflict

When a student's identity becomes the topic of debate in class, it is not up to them to combat toxic and harmful perceptions surrounding those identities. By learning how to intervene, professors and other students (who do not hold these identities) can combat microaggressions and stereotypes. By ignoring these situations or forcing students to defend their identities, distrust may be generated between the student and the class as a whole. These situations can be even more difficult if the student is the only person that holds that identity (i.e. a person of color, a queer person, etc).

Resources:
- A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions from Asian Americans Advancing Justice
- Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION from Faculty Focus
- Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom from Faculty Focus

Learn About Differences in Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Two aspects of identity that are often confused are gender identity and sexual orientation, which are not the same thing. While sexual orientation relates to a person’s attraction to others, gender identity is a person’s internal perceptions of themself. Gender identities do not equate to sexual orientations, and there are a plethora of ways that these aspects of a person’s identity may be mixed and matched. A cisgender (someone who identifies with their gender assigned at birth) man (gender identity) could be bisexual (sexual orientation), and a transgender woman (gender identity) could be straight (sexual orientation). These identities, while somewhat related, are separate phenomena. Almost every person has a gender identity and sexual orientation, although people who are agender have no gender identity and asexual people may not experience sexual attraction.

Part of creating inclusive spaces is understanding how others perceive themselves as well as the world around them. By learning more about gender identities and sexual orientations, you learn how to create spaces where different people can feel understood, safe, and welcome.
Resources:
- Definitions from Trans Student Educational Resources
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Glossary Of Terms from GLAAD
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender from GLAAD

Normalize Pronoun Sharing

Sharing the pronouns you use shows that you recognize people may identify differently than with the sex they were assigned at birth. It shows that transgender and non-binary students are welcome in your classroom and that you will take their identities seriously. Putting your pronouns in your syllabus, email signature, and/or sharing them in class are all great ways to normalize pronoun sharing in an academic setting, and should indicate that you are working to inclusivize your classroom. Give students the option to share their pronouns, but never force them to disclose that information.

Resources:
- Pronoun Guide from GLSEN
- 5 Myths About Teaching Personal Pronouns Debunked from We Are Teachers

Challenge Notions of Heteronormativity and Cissexism

“Heteronormativity” is the belief that heterosexuality is the norm, standard, default, or most moral sexual orientation. This notion also functions in tandem with “cissexism”, which is systemic prejudice in the favor of cisgender people (people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth). These notions have consistently marginalized people with different sexualities and gender identities throughout history. By setting heterosexuality and cisgender identities as the default, we continue the narrative that there is something inherently “wrong” with the people who don’t fall into these categories and continue to ignore the reality that queer identities have existed for just as long as humanity, if not longer.

Challenging heteronormativity and cissexism creates a better community for everyone, especially our LGBTQIA+ community members. Look at your course materials. Do you include different types of families in the images and examples that you use? Does your curriculum reduce men and women to their reproductive function, and altogether ignore the existence of nonbinary individuals? Do you reduce relationships between lesbian and gay couples to friendships? Why is this? Challenging the notion of heteronormativity and cissexism means recognizing and acknowledging the full spectrum of human sexuality and the various nuances of gender.
Be Aware of Gender Dynamics in Classroom Discussions

Regardless of classroom composition, cisgender men in the United States (and throughout a majority of the world) have generally been socialized to dominate discussions and interrupt people of other genders. Whether or not cisgender men are conscious of this phenomenon, we encourage you to be aware of this dynamic and to mediate classroom discussions to give everyone a fair chance to speak. Encourage students who don’t often get the opportunity to speak to share their thoughts, and try to limit the time that more outspoken students utilize to share theirs. This allows students equal opportunities to participate in classroom discussions.

Resources:

- [3 Examples of Everyday Cissexism from Everyday Feminism](https://www.everydayfeminism.com/3-examples-of-everyday-cissexism/)

Make a Genuine Effort to Learn Students’ Names

Making an effort to learn students’ names is an excellent way of building rapport and shows that you are genuinely interested in interacting with your students. A seemingly prevalent complaint (directed primarily towards students with names derived from non-European languages) is that certain names are “too hard to pronounce”. These complaints are deeply rooted in strong biases that favor white students over students of color. Names are a huge part of our identity and often hold great meaning for us. Think about how it feels when someone says your name incorrectly, especially if it happens over and over. It can be painful and defeating. Addressing someone by their correct name is a sign of respect. It can take time and practice, and it’s something we are all capable of doing.

Resources:

- [Why Pronouncing Students’ Names is Important to Building Relationships from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards](https://www.nbpts.org/publications/why-pronouncing-students-names-is-important-to-building-relationships.aspx)

Avoid Tone Policing

“Tone policing” is a silencing tactic used to discredit individuals in conversations about oppression by focusing on the way something is said rather than the actual content of what is being said. This tactic functions on the line of thought that it is impossible to be both emotional and rational, which discourages individuals from speaking about their own experiences. It usually serves to make the less marginalized person feel more comfortable and to limit exposure
to feedback about harm that has been caused. Sometimes, classroom rules and agreements may have a tenant such as “respect others” which may further serve the tone policing tactic, again functioning on the logic that certain tones of voice are inherently less respectful. Instead of derailing conversations with tone policing, encourage students to speak authentically about their experiences and evaluate the content of their words instead of the way they are said.

A related tactic is the use of tears to derail a conversation. Sometimes, a student may cry and instead of focusing on the content of what has been said the classroom becomes a place to console the crying student. There is also the possibility of someone in your class having a trauma background which could result in negative responses to raised voices. It is important to note the nuance of this issue- in situations like this, there may not be a right answer. Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it, or to bring in mediators. Encourage students to leave the classroom if they need to.

Resources:
- No, We Won’t Calm Down – Tone Policing Is Just Another Way to Protect Privilege from Everyday Feminism
- Educators Must Mind Tone Policing from the School Library Journal
- When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color by Mamta Motwani Accapadi

Provide Captions or Transcripts

All too often online lectures or videos shown during in-person lectures are left without captions or transcripts, which can result in students missing vital pieces of information. Automatically-generated subtitles provided by YouTube are frequently inaccurate and can prove to be quite frustrating for Deaf (people who are actively participating in Deaf culture), deaf (people who are medically deaf but for whatever reason do not actively participate in Deaf culture), and hard-of-hearing (people with mild to moderate hearing loss) students. Providing captions or transcripts in your lectures, in advance of someone requesting, means you are better serving students who are uncomfortable about disclosing they are d/Deaf, unable to afford medical testing, ESL learners, folks who struggle with attention, people who experience dissociation, and many others.

If your curriculum uses Zoom as a lecture platform, consider recording each session to the cloud. Transcripts are automatically generated and typically available within 24 hours. Transcripts can be edited for accuracy and activated by viewers as closed captioning. Google Hangouts also has a similar capacity to automatically produce live captions.

Resources:
- Tips and Tricks for Creating Accessible Video Lectures from Arizona State University
• Creating Accessible Course Content from Boise State University

Utilize Course Website Options

Many educators provide course materials (PowerPoint slides, syllabi, lecture recordings, etc.) via BlackBoard or similar sites. By placing course content in a central location, you ensure that all students have access to them. Students may miss classes due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances. By only providing class information during lecture, professors encourage ill students to come to class and potentially spread their illness to the campus community (which could potentially endanger the lives of immunocompromised community members). Some professors encourage students to rely on their classmates for notes, but this functions on the assumption that every student keeps immaculate notes.

By placing lecture materials online, you give students the opportunity to focus more of their attention on the lecture and less on trying to capture information from the lecture slides and ensure that students aren’t missing information that may have been said once over the course of a lecture. Online lecture materials also allow students to review course content prior to class and ask questions to clarify their understanding.

Consider Using Open Educational Resources to Cut Costs for Students

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are free, openly-licensed materials that permit use, revision, and redistribution. The use of OERs can cut, if not completely eliminate, textbook costs for students. This ultimately helps all students and makes academia more accessible for low-income students.

Resources:
• Open Educational Resources at Boise State

Be Aware of Concrete Course Time Commitments Outside of Class

Many students have commitments outside of class, including work and caregiving roles that may prevent them from fully participating in group work assigned to out-of-class hours. By assigning group work, service-learning and other field-based expectations to be completed out of class, you may place undue strain on these students and in turn, their groupmates. Be considerate of your students’ outside of class obligations when assigning work outside of class.

Be Mindful of Non-Christian Holidays

While the academic calendar largely accounts for the major holidays of the Christian calendar, students of other religions are not often offered the same courtesy. Religiously active students
following non-Christian holidays may accrue additional absences, which could be accounted for if non-Christian holidays were taken into consideration. Ask students before or on the first day of classes if there are any days that they know of that they will be out of class or otherwise unable to participate within the classroom environment. This may help both yourself and students consciously plan for the future.

Resources:
- Calendar of Holidays and Religious Observances - University of Washington
- Religious Observance Calendar - University of Richmond

Employ Methods of Universal Design for Learning to Engage Students

Every professor has their own teaching style. Naturally, one’s teaching style may not be what’s best for every student. Think about your courses--are you providing a fair range of activities for your students to participate, or is your course structure rigid and limited? Do you have activities that will benefit different learning styles, or is your course constructed to benefit a very specific type of student? Consider the value of adding hands-on-activities, cooperative group work, various types of lecture media (podcasts, videos, diagrams, readings, etc.) to your courses.

Resources:
- Fostering Inclusion with Universal Design for Learning from the Association of American Colleges and Universities
- The UDL Guidelines from CAST
- What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)? from Understood