

Inclusive Learning Environment Strategies to Engage Students in the Classroom

Examine your assumptions

It is common for instructors to assume that students share their own background, but this is not necessarily so. Do you find yourself addressing students as if they all share your religion, sexual orientation, or economic class?

Learn and use students' names

Even in large classes, you can start with a few names and build up. At the very least, let students know you are making an effort to do so.

Model inclusive language

For instance, avoid using masculine pronouns for both males and females. When you use American idioms, explain them for the benefit of non-native English speakers.

Use multiple and diverse examples

Multiple examples increase the likelihood of students relating to at least one of them. Take care to include examples that speak to both sexes, racial differences, and that work across cultures.

Establish ground rules for interaction

This will assure that other students are also being inclusive and respectful. In order to generate maximal buy-in into the ground rules, you can involve the students in the process of establishing them. You will still need to enforce the ground rules and correct students for the occasional non-inclusive or disrespectful comment.

Examine your curriculum

Are certain perspectives systematically not represented in your course materials (e.g., a course on family focusing only on traditional families, or a course on public policy ignoring race issues)? Neglecting some issues implies a value judgment (Hooks 1994), which can alienate certain groups of students.

Strive to be fair

It is crucial to be perceived as fair, both in grading and in implementing course policies. Perceptions of unfairness can induce feelings of learned helplessness (Peterson et al., 1995), which are highly demotivating for students.

Be mindful of low ability cues

In their efforts to help students, some instructors inadvertently send mixed messages (e.g., "Sure, I'll be happy to help you with this, I know girls have trouble with math"). These cues encourage attributions focused on permanent, uncontrollable causes, which diminish students' self-efficacy. Instead, it is more productive to focus on controllable causes, such as effort.

Provide accommodations for students with disabilities

Instructors are required by law to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities.

Don't ask people to speak for an entire group

Students of underrepresented identities often report either feeling invisible in class, or sticking out like a sore thumb as the token member. This experience is heightened when they are addressed as spokespeople for their whole group, and can have implications on performance (Lord & Saenz, 1985).

Practice inclusive classroom behaviors

As educators, we are not out to intentionally exclude anybody from the educational experience. However, there are those small, unconscious behaviors – “microaggressions” – that certain student groups experience repeatedly. For instance, women and African Americans report that instructors tend to interrupt them more often, ignore them more often, call on them less often, ask them more recall questions and less analytical questions, acknowledge their contributions less, and build on their answers less (Hall, 1982). These microaggressions add up and have a highly discouraging effect on those students.

References

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