

The Multicultural Classroom

Spend even a minute wandering the halls of Ryerson University, and you'll be impressed with the diversity of the student body. Supporting and engaging students from such a variety of backgrounds and cultural experiences can be a challenge. The first step to creating an inclusive classroom is recognizing the ways a university classroom can be biased against international students, students who speak English as an additional language, or students from a minority group.

In her work as a professor, Peggy McIntosh began to realize that oppression went beyond dedicated acts of hatred. It also consisted of the privileged status she received as a member of the dominant power group, a privilege that could only exist when other groups were kept at a disadvantage. As a white woman, she says:

I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely. As my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

Furthermore, this privilege extends beyond just skin color. In different and often intersecting ways, it affects people based on their gender, ethnicity, nationality, physical ability, religion, age, or sexual orientation. To conclude her essay, McIntosh asks “What will we do with such knowledge? It is an open question... whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base” ([McIntosh, 1988](#)).

International Students

Students who began their education outside of Canada may need some time to adjust to a different style of learning. For instance, in North American classrooms, students may be expected to challenge the ideas of their professors and their peers, as well as ask questions, engage in debate, and be assertive and outspoken. There is also a great deal of variability in North American classrooms, with some instructors preferring a great degree of formality, and teaching via a lecture format, and other instructors preferring a more casual style, with class discussions and group work being the norm ([Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variations in the Classroom](#)).

These differences in what is expected of them can confuse and frustrate students who have grown up outside of North America. For instance, in many countries, the role of the instructor is to “impart expert knowledge and the student’s role is to absorb it... It would seem presumptuous for a novice to challenge and expert.” International students that are accustomed to this dynamic may be reluctant to engage in a debate in class or to ask questions or volunteer answers ([Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variations in the Classroom](#)).

In every learning environment, there are unspoken expectations governing classroom interaction and communication. “If we remain unaware of such possible cultural influences, they can cause misunderstandings in the classroom... In general, increasing your knowledge about and sensitivity to ethnic, racial, and cultural groups other than your own will help you become a better teacher” ([Teaching a Diverse Student Body](#)).

EAL Students

Many students at the university level also speak English as an additional language. Mastering course content and performing well on exams and assignments can be challenging enough when English is your native tongue. When you are also struggling to master a new vocabulary and writing style, the workload can quickly become overwhelming. However, there are ways to keep frustration to a minimum.

1. When reviewing assignments with your students, make sure the instructions and requirements were clearly articulated. Review any language that is highly specialized, technical, or colloquial. Share any rubrics or grading criteria for the assignment.
2. Provide several examples. Providing models of expected style and structure will help students know what they should be working toward, as well as demonstrate the potential for diversity of approach.
3. Give students the opportunity to ask questions about the assignment in class or during office hours. Learn their writing processes or their concerns for the class. If they're open to it, ask them if there are specific areas where they hope for feedback. Schedule meetings with them during various points in the term to discuss their ideas, organization, and planning to make sure they're on the right track with assignments.
4. Encourage your students to bring their proposals or rough drafts to Student Learning Support programs (i.e. [Writing Centre](#) or [English Language Support](#)) for a one-on-one tutoring session. The Writing Centre can also help them with style and citation guidance.

(Adapted from: [Supporting ESL Students](#) and [Tips on Teaching ESL Students](#))

When providing feedback on student assignments:

1. Minimize grammar markup. In the absence of explicit grammatical instruction, it is difficult for students to deduce grammatical rules from a series of corrections.
2. Ignore language mistakes that do not obscure meaning, especially in the early stages. When you find a severely obstructive mistake, ask students to "tell me more about what you're trying to say here" so you can help them find the language to express their ideas.
3. If students specifically request grammatical feedback, concentrate on errors that severely obstruct meaning. Choose one or two types of errors to concentrate on, focusing on the most frequent or most important errors.
4. Keep comments text-specific and instructive. Comments like "Good. Add example" or "More info about disease progression would help me understand treatment phases" might take a bit longer to write, but will give students very individual feedback and clear instruction for their specific text.

(Adapted from: [Supporting ESL Students](#) and [Tips on Teaching ESL Students](#))

Marginalized Students

Creating an inclusive classroom environment will keep students from feeling marginalized, and thus frustrated and disengaged. Marginalization can creep in from all different directions, from holding office hours at night, when students with jobs and families won't be able to attend, to allowing one dominant male student to monopolize class discussion.

For instance, in a survey of undergraduate students of color at the University of Michigan, responses all fell along similar themes. Students reported that:

1. Instructors had low expectations for them and thus did not encourage them or affirm their abilities.
2. Instructors didn't reach out or have time for them, and thus student were reluctant to reach out or visit during office hours.
3. Instructors didn't understand that the students were different, and were made to feel estranged or excluded when the instructors made assumptions that didn't apply to them.
4. Instructors stereotyped or lumped all the students of color together, as if they were a homogenous group.
5. Instructors made students of color feel uncomfortable when they were identified and asked publicly to be a classroom authority on issues assumed to be relevant (and unique) to their racial group or on issues of racism and racial relations.
6. Students felt excluded by the curriculum and classroom interaction. They reported that their group's history or experience was excluded from course materials, or were overlooked in favor of a certain privileged type.
7. Instructors seemed uncomfortable or overly cautious with students of color, favoring interactions with students with the same background as themselves.
8. Students found classroom structures and pedagogical approaches too limited, designed to fit a narrow range of student behaviors, interests, and learning preferences.

However, student reported that they felt more included when:

1. Course material was made more inclusive, representing a range of diverse traditions.
2. Pedagogical techniques were more varied and effective, presenting material in a variety of ways and actively engaging students.
3. Instructors encouraged and showed confidence in all their students.
4. Instructors led open and guided discussions of racial issues in ways that avoided the assignment of "expert status" to students of color.

[\(Perceptions of Faculty Behavior by Students of Color\)](#)

Creating a Safe Space

Combat marginalization by creating a safe space for students in your classroom. If students feel that the instructor supports them, they will be more likely to participate in discussion. To make sure the classroom environment is a positive place for all students:

1. Set ground rules for behavior in class and make sure all students are aware and understand these rules. Review these rules periodically throughout the term.
2. Anticipate controversial course material, and think in advance as to how you will deal with potential disagreements or arguments around sensitive topics.
3. Encourage students to listen actively and to be aware of others' perspectives. "For example, you can ask each student to restate the other person's point in a manner satisfactory to that person before they respond to it. This will help prevent careless arguing."
4. Don't ignore disturbing remarks, even if they are unrelated to course material. If you don't call students out on their prejudice, your silence may be read as an unofficial endorsement.
5. "Reflect disturbing statements back to the speaker by repeating them very slowly and accurately... After repeating the remark, invite the student to speak again. Often, hearing the words repeated back non-judgmentally will cause the student to rephrase the remark, changing the language and sometimes the meaning and intent in the process."

If the discussion gets too heated, stop the class and find the part of the disruption that can be used for further discussion.

1. "Ask students to think about how their reactions mirror the subject at hand, and what they might learn about the subject from their own behavior or experience... use the passion as a vehicle to talk about differences in kinds and levels of discourse."
2. If the class remains agitated or polarized, shift pedagogical strategies, allowing them to break into small groups to discuss their assumptions, or write short reflective papers discussing the incident and then share their response with a classmate.
3. When time allows, you can "ask the students to write a brief response paper for the next class. In it they could outline their opinion on the topic, explain other viewpoints, or explain the possible implications of the points under discussion. To help develop their understanding of multiple perspectives, you could ask them to argue the position they disagree with in their paper."

(Adapted from [Teaching in Racially Diverse College Classrooms](#) and [Teaching a Diverse Student Body: Dealing With Conflicts](#))

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