Diversity and Inclusion: Core Seminar

“When I hear people saying, ‘diversity is not an issue’—it is the biggest issue, I think, in creating a learning environment.”

Professor Susan Case, Weatherhead School of Management

Seminar Description

This seminar will assist you in identifying the cultural assumptions you may bring to the teaching process. We will discuss strategies for creating a welcoming and accommodating learning environment for all students in your classroom.

Seminar Objectives

- To understand the concept of unconscious bias and how your unconscious bias(es) may impact your perceptions of students and your planning process for your TA role(s).
- To use awareness of unconscious bias to decide effective ways to provide a welcoming and appropriately accommodating response to all students, especially international students, underrepresented students (African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American), and students with specific religious perspectives.
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Diversity at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU)

Students and faculty at CWRU come from all over the United States and from many countries. They represent ethnic, religious, sexual and socioeconomic minorities, as well as dominant groups. You may find that your classroom includes students from Asia and Africa, students from small towns in Ohio, students from large Midwestern cities, students who are first-generation Americans from European families, students who are the first in their families to attend college, and older students returning to college after a career, just to name a few. You might teach students who are traditionally under-represented in your discipline or in college itself. The diversity in your classroom presents an opportunity for enrichment; the more diverse your students are, the more all of you have to learn from one another.

Challenges, however, can accompany great opportunities. As an instructor, you have an obligation to sustain a classroom climate that is welcoming to every individual you teach. Of course, you must disdain overt discrimination on the basis of race, religion, age, sex, disability, sexual orientation, or national or ethnic origin, as described in Case Western Reserve’s non-discrimination policy. However, you must also be alert to subtle conflicts that may offend or discourage members of the campus community. The following guidelines will help you foster a classroom climate that is conducive to everybody’s learning.

Intercultural Competency as an Inclusive Teaching Strategy

As members of the CWRU community, we all bring varying perspectives based on our personal backgrounds and beliefs. All of us within our campus community should strive to enhance our intercultural competency as we collaborate and learn from each other inside and outside of the classroom. In recognition of the complex cultural make-up of our students, we should treat each student as an individual. As we become acquainted with our students, they will decide what to share about their life stories.

Ender and Newton (2000) suggest that interculturally competent individuals are open to experiencing perspectives that are different from their own because those individuals understand that a truly global community is comprised of a staggering number of varying viewpoints. To foster an inter-cultural environment, we should strive to “accept … [our] own cultural programming, appreciate personal differences without making negative judgments and refrain from indiscriminately applying stereotypical information and over generalizing secondhand information to all … groups” (p. 50).

Additionally, Ender and Newton offer principles that are of use to those of us in educational settings with a diverse student body. These principles provide a guide for fostering an open and comfortable atmosphere for students as they work towards mastery of the course objectives:
Ender’s and Newton’s Principles

- “All assumptions are cultural,” (p. 76) meaning that we tend to filter our daily encounters through our life experiences and that if we do not intentionally become more flexible, we may lose the opportunity to learn from others who have different cultural assumptions.

- “It is necessary to suspend judgment temporarily” (p. 76) because without putting aside our natural tendency to judge our experiences, we may not acquire accurate information through our interactions.

- “Context and content both matter” (p. 77) as we process experiences. If we only assess others’ reactions and statements without attempting to understand the explicit and implicit context for this behavior, we may not truly understand the experience or increase our intercultural competency.

- “Becoming comfortable with discomfort is both possible and necessary” (p. 77) in order to ultimately increase our intercultural competency. If we withdraw each time that we find ourselves slightly uncomfortable, we will not grow. As Enders and Newton add, “[d]evelopmental growth emerges out of some discomfort or dissonance, and the resolution of the discomfort promotes growth” (p. 78).

- “Curiosity and deliberate inquisitiveness improve information accuracy” (p. 78). If we are consistently asking ourselves questions about what we observe, we are more likely to base our responses on these observations rather than previously learned behavior that may be based on a less than diverse environment.

Ender and Newton encourage those interested in intercultural competency to realize that developing the ability to interact successfully in a global community requires that we embrace this lifelong learning as both “developmental” and “experimental” (p. 78). In other words, we must accept that we are always moving along this journey of competency, and we must be willing to put ourselves in new settings that may be initially uncomfortable.
Strategies for Fostering an Inclusive Academic Setting

Preparing for and Conducting Class

Make sure you have high expectations of everyone.

Apply and enforce those expectations uniformly. Avoid asking under-represented students easier questions than you ask of non-minorities; all of your students will see this strategy as condescending and will resent your implied attitude.

Take the time to learn how to pronounce every student’s name.

Be sure they know how you would like to be addressed and can pronounce your name. Use good eye contact; be friendly both in the classroom and when you see students on campus.

Divide your time and attention equally among all students.

If you stay after class to talk to students informally, make sure all students who are interested have the opportunity to chat. Watch for students who are shy; they are there for reasons just as valid as those of the more assertive students. Make sure you have attended to everyone who stayed after class. One way to do this is to ask students with lengthy questions to wait while you attend to more quickly resolved issues. In class, call on under-represented students with the same frequency you call on everyone else. Spending disproportionately more time with any single group of students, regardless of status, will be seen as favoritism.

Do not assume that everyone in class is heterosexual.

Demonstrate an attitude of uniform tolerance and refrain from any disparaging remarks toward gay, lesbian, transgender, transsexual, and bisexual students. Many of your heterosexual students would also be offended by such sexist comments.

Do not assume under-represented students will provide a “minority” perspective.

Not all women are devotees of feminist studies, nor are all African-American students avid readers of Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. Such assumptions suggest that under-represented students are unreasonably uniform in their perspectives and that non-minority students need not be interested in a diverse realm of knowledge. Respect the individual interests and outlooks of all the students in your class rather than pigeonholing them by race, ethnicity, or gender.
Avoid bias in your own speech and teaching.

Use visual aids that represent people in all their diversity; use examples that do not assume stereotypical roles or behaviors. For example, avoid hypothetical cases in which all physicians are men or all nurses are women, or all professionals are white. Avoid the generic “he;” use equal numbers of men and women in examples, or say “he or she.”

Choose reading materials that are free of bias.

If the text you must use includes stereotypical examples or descriptions, acknowledge them in class discussion and suggest how the information could have been depicted without bias; if you simply ignore them, the students may think you find them acceptable.

Ask questions in a positive way.

For example, ask, “who can give me the first step of the answer to number 14?” rather than “is there anyone who did not understand number 14?” Answering the latter question requires a student to risk self-humiliation; answering the former encourages volunteering with confidence.

Be respectful of older, non-traditional students.

It is increasingly common for adults to return to college during or after a lengthy career to pursue the studies they always wanted or to prepare themselves for career changes or promotions. Some will be very confident because of their maturity and experience, while some will be intimidated by the youthful college environment. Non-traditional students can be an asset to class discussion because of their experience and judgment, but resist the urge to conduct all your discussion with them while less experienced students watch. Maintain fair standards of participation and achievement for everyone.

Monitoring Student Interactions

Be alert to patterns of discussion or interaction that reflect bias.

Take steps to correct those patterns. For example, you may notice that a male student ignores a female student’s remark but responds affirmatively to a male student’s similar comment. Or you may notice that some students are more readily interrupted than others in class discussion. If these things should happen, return the discussion to the comment that was overlooked, or insist that everyone listen without interruption. Point out these patterns and discuss them in a non-hostile manner.
Remember that people have different preferred conversational styles.

These styles often (though not always) correspond with gender or ethnic status. Some students may feel a cultural or social pressure to remain quiet in class or to limit their participation so that they do not take up more than their perceived fair share of class time and attention. Vary your classroom approaches to accommodate all of these needs. For example, hold a brainstorming session one day to encourage contribution without judging, while structuring a competitive debate on another day, or alternate between full-class discussions and small groups which may encourage quieter individuals to speak up.

If you divide your class into small groups, make diverse groups.

Assign individuals into groups which allow a mix of personalities and styles rather than just letting students gather with their immediate neighbors. Allow everyone the chance to work with people with whom they may not usually interact. If you have a cluster of confident, talkative students, divide them up among the groups and encourage them to help draw out more reticent students.

Refuse to tolerate biased or derogatory comments in the classroom.

If students should make any such comments, quickly point out that such remarks are inappropriate; suggest alternative ways to approach the subject, if possible. If you simply ignore such remarks, students will think you find them acceptable.

Teaching International Students

Many TAs may feel that they lack the training needed to teach international students. The following are guidelines for accommodating the needs of international students in your classroom in an effective manner.

Early on in the semester, assess the cultural climate of your classroom.

If international students are in your class, let them know that you are available to them. Encourage them and other students in the class to inform you if any part of the course is making them uncomfortable, or if they need clarification on the material. Consider asking students to respond to the following questions (adapted from Cones, Janha, and Noonan(1983)):

- Does the course instructor treat students in the class equally?
• How comfortable do you feel participating in class? What makes participating easy or difficult for you? If you find participating to be difficult, how could the TA accommodate you?

• In what ways does your background as an international student affect your interactions with the TA of this class or with your fellow students?

You can often gather this information by asking your students to write you an informal letter in which they can describe their academic history and anything that they feel you should know in order to do your best teaching for them.

**Do not assume that all of your students understand typical American classroom culture.**

Some international students may be used to a more formal classroom atmosphere than you may wish to use. Instead, ask students to help you set up the ground rules for how your class, lab, or tutorial session will work. This approach encourages active participation while at the same time, creates an icebreaker that produces some meaningful work.

**Become more informed about the history and culture of groups represented in your classroom.**

You do not need to become an expert in this topic, but you should attempt to learn more about your students’ cultural background(s). You may consider engaging your students before or after class, asking if what you have learned is correct. For the native speakers in your class, you might also ask them about their home state and how living there is similar or different from living in Cleveland.

**Understand that international students (like other students) may learn best if they have both oral and written information that summarizes the key points in a lecture, assignment directions, and/or announcements.**

In this sense, you do not need to treat international students any differently than native speakers in your class. When giving a lecture, make certain to have a balance between audio and visual aspects of your presentation. Visual components could take the form of a PowerPoint, handouts with key terms from the material, and an outline or diagram on the board.
Convey the same level of respect and confidence in the abilities of all students in your classroom.

Research has shown that many TAs unconsciously base their expectations of students on such factors as socio-economic status, language proficiency, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and appearance. Although this point might fall into the broader category of diversity, it is especially true for international students. For example, an international student who is reluctant to speak in class might have exemplary ideas to contribute when given the opportunity to write about those ideas. Instead of allowing that student to put forth those ideas only in writing, encourage the student to speak about those ideas in class. Most importantly, set standards of excellence for your entire class, requiring them to work diligently and to achieve high standards.

Avoid “protecting” any group of students from your class.

Do not be reluctant in offering constructive criticism to international students, giving them an advantage over other students in your class. International students will likely assess that you are giving them an unfair advantage. For example, a TA who gives international students extra time on tests believes this is a considerate action. But international students may feel patronized, while native speakers in the class might resent the preferential treatment.

Avoid praising international students’ work too emphatically in relation to how you are grading other students’ work.

One tendency among TAs and Professors is that they sometimes exaggerate positive comments on the work of students who they suspect are less capable of good work. For example, an international student may complain about her TA repeatedly deeming her papers to be exemplary, when other students in the class are doing equally well, if not better. The TA’s excessive praise, although intended to be encouraging, might make a student feel uncomfortable and singled out.

Aim for an inclusive curriculum.

You should use texts and readings that reflect a pluralistic society, including new scholarship and research about previously underrepresented groups.

Emphasize the value of considering different approaches and viewpoints.

Use classroom discussions to help all students in your class to appreciate how one’s premises, observations, and interpretations are influenced by social identity and background.
Clearly indicate to your students that you value all comments.

Students need to be comfortable with you and their peers to advance and defend their opinions. Avoid proclaiming your own opinion during a debate, which might silence students in your classroom who would otherwise counter that opinion. If, however, certain groups of students are monopolizing the conversation, make certain to call upon other students who seem reluctant to participate.

Reevaluate your pedagogical criteria for teaching in a diverse setting.

For many TAs and Professors at colleges and universities, the exemplary student is one who contributes to class discussion and challenges opinions. For some students, including international students, this type of classroom behavior is not exemplary and is perhaps even rude. Recognize that this type of cultural belief might cause some international students to be reluctant in asking questions or participating. The challenge in this scenario is to strike a balance between verbally assertive students and those of other styles and expressions of learning.

Address distasteful remarks directly and immediately.

You might be tempted to ignore such remarks, but you should confront them. Explain why a comment is offensive or insensitive, and that such discriminatory commentary is not acceptable.

Be sensitive to students whose first language is not English.

International students in your class have likely taken English proficiency tests, but may still struggle somewhat with the English language. Avoid correcting spoken English during class, as this may embarrass the student in front of his or her peers. But for homework, papers and exams, it is to the benefit of the student for you to offer corrections in grammar. You can also refer them to the Writing Resource Center or the SAGES Peer Writing Crew; both groups have been trained to work with writers for whom English is not their first language.

Encourage students to come to your office hours or engage them in conversation before or after class.

When students become comfortable speaking with you informally, they are likely to participate more during class. Meeting with students individually can also provide an opportunity for you to speak about their progress or for them to voice their concerns about the class.
Provide opportunities for all students to become acquainted with one another.

This could involve something as simple as a small-group discussion during class, or more extensive group projects. If possible, ensure that the small-groups consist of a diverse array of individuals.

**Working with Students with Disabilities**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991 protect students with disabilities from discrimination and establish the basis for the provision of reasonable accommodations in order to fully participate in the programs and services of the University. The student’s process of securing accommodations begins at Educational Services for Students (ESS).

ESS is the resource center for students with disabilities. Students requesting accommodations must submit documentation and meet with Susan Sampson, ESS Associate Director for Disability Resources. Upon a determination of the appropriate accommodations, the student will be requested to notify his/her instructors of the approved accommodations. The student will present an official memo from Disability Resources.

The student and the faculty member or TA may collaborate and establish methods for implementing the specified accommodations. At times, the evaluation methods might require some modification for the student with a disability. Though all students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of the course content through the completion of assignments and examinations, a faculty member’s or TAs methods of teaching and evaluation should be nondiscriminatory. Students with disabilities are expected to meet the essential components of the course requirements.

ESS also assists faculty and TAs in providing reasonable accommodations to students. For instance, ESS may assist by administering tests and examinations for first-year students requiring extended time, a quiet space, or assistive technology. Additionally, Disability Resources can assist students in obtaining auxiliary aides. Within ESS, the Electronic Learning Center (ELC) offers an array of assistive technology enabling students with disabilities to access the Case Network and the Internet. Finally, students with disabilities have access to all ESS tutoring programs, as well as individual academic counseling and self-advocacy training offered by the ESS professional staff.

The following guidelines will assist you in working with students with disabilities:

- Contact Disability Resources in ESS if you have any questions (disability@case.edu or (216) 368-5230). The final responsibility for the provision of academic accommodations
belongs to the instructor. However, ESS is prepared to assist you in this process.

• Talk with the student as early as possible. Outline your method of teaching the course, and try to work out solutions to any problems.

• Do not assume a problem exists or that a certain arrangement will address a problem without discussing your concerns with the student. You might waste time and energy effecting a well-meaning but futile action.

• Be flexible and open. If one method isn’t working, be willing to try something else.

• Do not try your hand at counseling related to the disability itself, unless you happen to be an expert in this area. Your student knows what will and will not help. He or she has adapted to life with a disabling condition.

• Be sensitive to the student’s standing among his or her peers. The student is the only one that can decide to disclose this information. Faculty should not disclose the student’s disability to other faculty or students.

• Consider adding the following statement regarding disability accommodations to your syllabus: Students with disabilities at Case Western Reserve University may be eligible for academic accommodations. If you need accommodations, please schedule a confidential appointment with me so that we can discuss your needs. If you have not done so already, please be sure to also contact the office of Disability Resources in ESS, Sears 470:
  http://studentaffairs.case.edu/education/disability

Disability Resources has a number of one-page documents that provide additional information about specific disabilities as well as a manual that offers more information about how accommodations are provided. See the website for this information.

**Campus Resources for an Inclusive Educational Setting**

A number of campus offices will serve as resources to you as you learn to work with your students:

• The Office of Multicultural Affairs, Sears 450, phone 216-368-2904
• International Student Services, Sears 210, phone 216-368-2517
• The Office of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equal Opportunity, Adelbert, 310, phone 216-368-8877
Campus Assistance with Linguistic Competency

ESS, along with International Student Services (ISS), offers two programs that may be of assistance for students who have some spoken-English challenges:

ESS offers a presentation seminar series for students who want to enhance their delivery of classroom interviews. See this website for reservations:
http://studentaffairs.case.edu/education/resources/presentation.html

ESS and ISS are co-sponsoring a conversation group for international students hoping to increase their language proficiency. For information about group meeting times, contact Elise Geither, Associate Director for Spoken English, at elise.geither@case.edu or (216) 368-3790.

Work Cited


Additional Resources

Print


Electronic
