



## Fostering Cultural Humility in the Classroom

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### Cultural Competence vs. Cultural Humility

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019) has called for professors to develop **cultural competence**—the capacity to assess and identify commonalities within broad categories such as race, gender, and/or social class. Striving for cultural competence, however, assumes that an educator can master a finite body of knowledge, a notion that is limited by the expectation that there is an endpoint to the process. A troubling aspect of this approach is that “a little knowledge can be dangerous.” For example, a faculty member may be aware of funding disparities in schools with predominantly ethnic minorities and assume all ethnic minorities are underprepared academically. This unconscious bias on the part of the faculty member might impact how he or she treats ethnic minorities in the classroom (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2015). In this manner, attempting to achieve cultural competence could actually perpetuate stereotypes and generalizations which could be harmful to students. Assuming an ethnic minority is underprepared academically could result in low expectations and faculty not providing the academic challenges that would assist students in excelling. Conversely, assuming that a student has a natural talent due to their nationality or ethnic background could result in the faculty member not providing the necessary resources a student needs to succeed.

In contrast, Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) coined a term for a much more manageable and useful ideal for all faculty to strive toward: **cultural humility**. Rather than acquiring a specific knowledge base that drives interactions with individuals from different heritages, cultural humility is an achievable “way of being” which recognizes individual limitations in knowledge and skills and aligns with the growth mindset of lifelong learning (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016).

The fact that educators work with people who define their cultural identities in a complex network of attributes such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and social status as well as perceived roles and relationships requires them to incorporate cultural humility into their teaching practices and classrooms. Cultural humility is especially important in light of power imbalances in our multicultural society as it can foster inclusivity, empowerment, respect, collaboration, and lifelong learning (Foronda et al., 2016). Furthermore, enhancing cultural humility can counter impediments to education such as stereotyping, marginalization, stigmatization, and bullying (Foronda et al., 2016).





## What is Cultural Humility?

The concept of cultural humility is, first and foremost, a *process* “of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 213). Cultural humility has three components: 1) lifelong learning and critical self-reflection, 2) recognizing and challenging power imbalances for respectful relationships, and 3) institutional accountability (Moncho, 2013). This Teaching Tool focuses on the first step—ongoing, critical self-reflection.

Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) suggested that instructors challenge students to “think consciously about their own often ill-defined multidimensional cultural identities and backgrounds” (p. 120). Humility on the part of the instructor is paramount because it requires that professors relinquish their expertise; each student is the expert on their own identity. Bennett (2011) advised that instructors support students and challenge them regarding their perceptions and exercise of power. To promote acceptance, for example, Bennett suggested that instructors deepen cultural self-awareness and prepare learners for shifting their frames of reference as they explore differences in cultural values.

## Implementation

To assist in developing the skills and dispositions for cultural humility, the implementation can be broken into three categories: personal reflection, interpersonal or group discussion, and immersive experiences.

1. **Personal Reflection:** Fostering cultural humility should begin with introspection regarding the foundations for one’s own cultural identity, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Instructors should develop awareness of their own cultural identity and biases, and they should encourage students to do the same. Survey instruments and brief or extended prompts may be employed to encourage continuous contemplation of cultural humility.
  - a. **Scales:** Instructors may benefit from self-assessment via quantitative scales measuring [cultural humility](#) (Hook et al., 2013) or related constructs such as [intercultural sensitivity](#) (Bennett, 2011) and [ethnocentrism](#) (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Educators could also administer these survey instruments to their students, allowing students to get a better sense of their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding culture.
  - b. **Reflection Papers:** A simple activity designed to extend quantitative self-assessment and enhance more meaningful self-regulated learning involves an awareness-raising “one-minute” paper based on the following prompt: “How does the material you’ve heard thus far connect or conflict with your prior knowledge, beliefs, or values?” (Nilson, 2019). This brief reflection may be integrated into lectures during class or assigned to students engaged in course readings to prompt them to become aware of any cognitive dissonance regarding their previously held perspectives or extensions of their thinking on various topics relating to cultural humility.
  - c. **Journaling:** Short reflection papers could also be combined with regular or ongoing journal writing prompts tied to videos, readings, guest speakers, course lectures,



interviews, and other structured learning activities. Students could also be asked to reflect on cultural humility as it intersects with course content by engaging in creative work (e.g., creating or locating collage, music, video clips) to encourage innovative connections and enhance critical thinking (Anderson Juarez et al., 2006).

2. **Interpersonal or Group Discussion:** Students who have personally reflected on issues related to cultural humility would benefit from comparing and contrasting their views and experiences with their peers. Several techniques may be used to encourage meaningful interaction and dialogue to develop students' thinking over time.
  - a. **Discussion Boards:** Use of an [online discussion board](#) for a course can highlight the relevance of cultural humility to the academic content of the course. Sellers and Kirven (2019) explained that online instructors have a responsibility to encourage students to reflect on intersections of race, gender, class, and age and consider their experiences with privilege and oppression as they impact interactions with other students in virtual settings. Research has shown that students engage in online discussion boards to a quantitatively higher degree when challenged to answer questions creatively (e.g., including a GIF, cartoon, and/or song lyrics in their posts) (Dagistan, 2020). Such techniques could also enhance cultural humility by increasing perceived social presence on the learning platform by allowing students to express their identities, be open to the contributions of their peers, and contribute to a respectful communication dynamic (Sellers & Kirven, 2019).
  - b. **Standing Surveys:** The standing survey activity involves students expressing their opinions via their movement across the room regarding issues that have been selected ahead of time by the instructor and presented as declarative statements. The instructor may read the statement, and then tell students to “Stand on the left if you agree with the statement, on the right if you disagree, and in the middle if you are undecided.” (Shapiro et al., 2014, p. 74). This activity allows for students to share views, opinions, and interests—potentially on controversial matters—in ways that allow for deeper contemplation of the sources of their own perspectives and to compare and contrast them with those of their classmates.
  - c. **Think-Pair-Share:** This technique ensures that instructors give students the necessary “wait time” to contemplate a response to a question posed in class. Following a brief period for solitary thinking, students pair with another student in the class to discuss their thoughts. Then the pair shares with the entire class the common themes or new insights of their discussion (Lyman, 1981). For example, following a class lecture on the biological research of George Washington Carver, instructors might use the think-pair-share method to encourage students to think about and discuss the role of race in scientific discovery. Students might take a moment to articulate their own thoughts in writing, compare ideas with a classmate, and then voice their insights to the class at large. This approach not only would expose students to variables in society that intersect with the objective goals of science but would also assist students in obtaining cultural humility by promoting critical self-reflection as well as respectful interaction



with others who have different points of view.

3. **Immersive Experiences:** Self-reflection and discussion strategies can also be employed in conjunction with more hands-on learning experiences and environments. Instructors can encourage cultural humility among students via a range of experiential learning structures and extracurricular learning environments.
  - a. **Role Play/Simulations:** Interactive assignments involving role play scenarios, simulation, or applied theater techniques can allow students to reflect on their own cultural identities as well as communication barriers associated with cultural differences (e.g., bias, stereotypes, stigma, discrimination) (Ivory et al., 2016). In addition to reflecting on abstract or conceptual aspects of cultural humility, students can learn to recognize and adjust their emotional reactions and behaviors by solving problems, working on relationship-building skills, or confronting challenging situations (Anderson Juarez et al., 2006; Ivory et al., 2016).
  - b. **Field Experiences/Site Visits:** Teachers can intentionally address diversity and power dynamics through the lens of cultural humility. According to Fisher (2019) instructors can use reflective questions along with close guidance, training, and supervision to support students' development of critical awareness of cultural and sociopolitical factors impacting marginalized communities and of students' own biases and beliefs. Instructors can also help students bridge cultural humility with social justice and advocacy work by urging them to identify potential actions to facilitate change (Fisher, 2019).
  - c. **Study Away/Abroad:** Kent State offers numerous study away/abroad experiences that benefit students in multiple fields through immersive interaction with people in different communities and cultures. In addition to enhancing cultural humility, study away/abroad experiences significantly lead to "increases in civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, and social entrepreneurship in relation to the participants' current job" (Jenny et al., 2017, p. 460).
  - d. **Event Attendance:** If students are unable to experience student away/abroad programs, Kent State has many speakers who can assist students in gaining an understanding of cultural differences domestically and globally. For example, in the [Gerald H. Read Center](#), Fulbright scholars from across the globe speak on topics related to education, health, and human services. These events are open to the entire campus and are general enough to benefit all students. Other campus organizations, such as [Pan-African Studies](#) and the [LGBTQ+ Center](#) also routinely have speakers on campus. McCleary and Weaver (2008) suggested that it is helpful to prepare students for speakers by tying attendance to a class assignment and following up with a class discussion regarding the speaker (pp. 409-410).



## Frequently Asked Questions

- 1. Is cultural humility valuable for all courses?** Yes, classes in all disciplines can benefit from incorporating cultural humility to help students become more self-reflexive about how their beliefs, norms, and habits color their thought processes and communication with other people. Teaching students about cultural humility would be especially relevant to any course or discipline emphasizing professional training and/or tied to a client base or audience (e.g., nursing, medicine, counseling, education, journalism) (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Fisher, 2020; Ivory et al., 2016). Humanities-based courses (e.g., art, music, literature, film, theater) would be perfectly positioned to incorporate cultural humility by addressing multiple perspectives in ways that encourage critical reflection, self-disclosure, empathy, and appreciation for diversity (Anderson Juarez et al., 2006; Ivory et al., 2016). Instructors in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields could select texts and other course materials to present diverse perspectives or introduce students to a wider array of scholarship (Shapiro et al., 2014). They could also address the ways global politics impact scientific research or how some scholars are frequently excluded due to language barriers or limited access to funding and technology (Shapiro et al., 2014). The topic is also useful to address in ethics courses or in the context of any group-related decision making or collaborative assignments.
- 2. How do I introduce this topic into the course?** Cultural humility is a skill which is valuable in all professions and applies to all content areas. However, students often struggle with the concept because they do not understand that they are cultural beings. This applies especially to individuals in the majority, who often think that their way of being is the norm. When introducing the topic of cultural humility to students, it is important to help students first understand that they are cultural beings. The [Interactive Cultural Learning Tool](#) (Clark, 2012) assists students in creating an image of their own cultural identity. Instructors may follow up on the creation of the image of students' own cultural identity by having them explain their cultural identity in groups of four or five. Instructors should encourage students to share "who they are as cultural beings" with classmates, but also give them permission not to disclose anything that makes them uncomfortable. However, instructors should ask students to self-analyze their comfort level with sharing information about themselves and what in their past has influenced their comfort level. Instructors should explain to students that their level of comfort is directly tied to their cultural identity. If class time is limited, the sharing of cultural identities can shift to an essay assignment.
- 3. Should instructors share their cultural identities and feelings about cultural humility?** Yes. Examining one's own cultural identity and feelings about cultural humility provides valuable skills and knowledge, especially in a multicultural society. But doing so can also lead initially to feelings of insecurity and anxiety. This is especially true for individuals in which this is a new concept or practice. Thus, instructors should lead by example.
- 4. How do you motivate students to participate in these activities?** Instructors can incorporate cultural humility resources and activities into course requirements by attaching points for



participation or completion. Many of the resources in this Teaching Tool provide individualized feedback or a framework for introspection, so students may simply enjoy learning about cultural humility in a way that is confidential and tailored to each person. Instructors may also emphasize the relevance of cultural humility as it relates to course content or professional development.

5. **When should cultural humility be incorporated within a course?** Instructors may encourage limited self-disclosure at the beginning of the semester to learn more about their students and encourage respectful norms needed for inclusive teaching. But it is important to remember that fostering cultural humility is an ongoing process, so multiple strategies may be included in the course at different times. Once the instructor and students have been able to establish familiarity, rapport, and trust, the class may be more receptive to deeper levels of self-examination and discourse. They may also be better prepared to deal with complex and/or emotional reactions that occur in the process of reflecting on cultural humility.

## Other Resources

1. **Cultural Humility Scale**, Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey (2013): <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2013-15106-001.pdf>
2. **Ethnocentrism Scale**, Neuliep & McCroskey (1997): [Ethnocentrism scale](#)
3. **Intercultural Development Research (IDR) Institute**, Bennett (2011): <https://www.idrinstitute.org/>
4. **NAFSA: Association of International Educators**: <https://www.nafsa.org/>
5. **Project Implicit**, Ratliff (2011): <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

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