Culturally Inclusive Teaching

Judy Lightner
6/20/18

What Is Culturally Inclusive Teaching?

What is your definition of "instructor" and "student"? How did you come to that definition? Each individual's definitions and expectations may differ significantly based on prior educational experiences and cultural background (Gayle George, 1995). Within higher education, international student enrollment has created many new opportunities for culturally rich learning experiences. An increasingly multi-cultural setting can broaden students' awareness of different perspectives, but it can pose some challenges as well (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015).

The U.S. post-secondary educational culture is different than several non-western industrialized educational cultures – both in structure and student/instructor expectations. One example is that of the relative "informality" of classrooms in many U.S, post-secondary settings. Often, U.S. instructors are more than content experts, they are facilitators or discussion leaders and may encourage an informal classroom atmosphere. In contrast, students from other countries may have experienced a more formal environment in which there is little room for discussion and the professor is viewed as a content expert and authority figure. Both faculty and students may need to navigate classroom dynamics, writing styles, and faculty-student interactions in new and unfamiliar ways. A lack of awareness and understanding can lead to challenges in the classroom. Generalizations, stereotypes and unconscious bias about other cultures can also lead to intercultural miscommunication (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). For example, not all international students from China have the same cultural and educational backgrounds. Intercultural competence is the awareness of these differences and purposeful changes to certain behaviors in order to create a culturally inclusive classroom (Deardorff, 2009). Implementing some of the strategies below are steps you can take to create a rewarding and dynamic learning experience for all.

Strategies for Implementation

Documentation

- Revisit current syllabi. Consider asking a student who has indicated that English is a second language to read it over and highlight what may be unclear.
- Provide course and lecture information in multiple formats, such as making course documents and study guides accessible on a learning management system (e.g.Blackboard).
- Be sure to provide clear rubrics so that assignment expectations are clear. For example, explicitly state how you define class participation and how that will be graded.
- Make clear policies regarding submitting assignments late, extra credit, and grade cut-offs.
- Provide resources in regard to written assignments (e.g., Writing Center).
- Clarify appropriate use of references in written assignments.

In-class Activities

- Beginning with the first day, create an environment where all perspectives are respected.
    - Provide students an opportunity to share their prior educational experiences.
    - Work with the students to develop expectations for classroom civility and inclusion
- Explain the concept of instructor office hours and encourage students to take advantage of this time.
- If class participation is a challenge, utilize techniques such as think-pair-share followed by small group work. This may ease students new to student participation to feel more comfortable verbalizing their ideas and thoughts.
- Include "ground rules" for class discussions and online discussion boards. For example, if slang terms or idioms are used, these terms must be defined.

Frequently Asked Questions

a) It is not always apparent which students are international students, and it may be helpful to know the different backgrounds of my students at the beginning of the semester. How do I encourage students to voluntarily share this information?

One way may be to ask students before leaving class the first day to write down something they would like you to know about them or their culture. This can be anonymous. Another mechanism would be to ask students to complete an anonymous survey during the first week of class; allowing them to provide information about the prior classroom experiences, expectations of themselves and the instructor in the classroom and what may be unclear in the syllabus.

b) I often have international students share stories with me after class that are related to course material and from which other students would benefit greatly by hearing their perspective or experience. However, the international students are hesitant to share their opinions openly in the classroom context, especially if the topic is controversial in nature. How do I encourage international students to contribute to the class discussion?

This may be a very new concept to some international students. It may be helpful to model what a scholarly discussion about a controversial topic looks and sounds like. This can be done by scripting a brief exchange with a colleague and demonstrating that discussion in front of the class at the beginning of the semester. You could also prompt students to respond to topics online and then have students work with their peers to discuss their responses. This would provide them time to develop their response and prepare to talk with others. Talking with peers in a smaller group setting is one step towards students talking in the class.

c) I have noticed recently that some international students will attempt to negotiate every grade that I assign them. I do not want this to lead to contentious discussions, but sometimes students will not accept my final decision without long discussion.

It is customary in some cultures to negotiate grades, points, and deadlines. By being explicit in the syllabus about your class policies (e.g., late assignment submissions, extra credit) and the unique circumstances that may receive consideration, you may avoid repetitive negotiation attempts. Respectfully listen and refer to your policy as stated in the syllabus.

Other Resources

Carnegie Mellon University
http://eberly.cmu.edu/teaching-across-cultures

Northeastern University
https://www.northeastern.edu/learningresearch/culturally-inclusive-teaching-strategies/

University of Michigan
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/internationalstudents

University of Virginia
http://cte.virginia.edu/resources/teaching-a-diverse-student-body-practical-strategies-for-enhancing-our-students-learning/teaching-a-diverse-student-body-2/creating-an-inclusive-classroom-environment/

University of Virginia – Strategies for Teaching International Students
http://cte.virginia.edu/resources/teaching-a-diverse-student-body-practical-strategies-for-enhancing-our-students-learning/international-students/strategies-for-teaching-international-students/

University of Washington
http://www.washington.edu/teaching/teaching-resources/inclusive-teaching-at-uw/teaching-im-students/strategies-for-teaching-im-students/

References

Deardorff, D.K. (2009). *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gayle George, P. (1995). Examining the Culture of the Classroom. In College Teaching Abroad, Chapter 1., P.G. George. Allyn & Bacon.

Glass, C.R., Wongtrirat, R., and Buus, S. (2015). International Student Engagement: Strategies For Creating Inclusive, Connected, and Purposeful Campus Environments. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Ting-Toomey, S. and Chung, L. (2012) *Understanding intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.