

TEACHING TEACHING

Inclusive Teaching



Most inclusive teaching workshops are well-intentioned, but they lack specifics. They tell us we should create a classroom where all students can feel comfortable and thrive, but leave it at that. How do we actually create those spaces?

Here's some tips for how I create inclusive spaces. This list is not exhaustive, but hopefully is a good starting point.

First day

I believe the first day of class is by far the most important for setting the tone in your classroom. What kind of teacher are you, and how do you communicate that to your students?

Learn names

Before the first day of class, I study my roster. This makes it way easier to remember students' names once I meet them in person.

Remembering names, and pronouncing them correctly, is incredibly important to show respect and dignity for your students.

Course Covenant

In the first class, create a course covenant (example on my website). This has three sections: what I expect from you, what you expect from me, and what you expect from each other. I go through my expectations first, then ask students to create their own course policies. I tell students that we'll come back to this if we ever have an issue in the class. I've only enforced this once, when some students in a small class weren't letting others talk. I reminded them of the covenant, which the students took very seriously, and they immediately made space for others to participate. They also reminded other students about the covenant when they noticed that some students weren't getting a chance to speak up.

Make office hours accessible

Make sure students know what it is and that they're encouraged to come. I have a guide about how to get students to come to office hours on my website.

Student survey

To better understand your students and show that you care about their well-being, give out a survey near the end of the first class. This gives students a chance to privately let you know about outside circumstances (like having a job or family care) or accommodations. An example survey is available on my website.

Pronoun use

One easy way to be inclusive is model pronoun use. On the first day I use name cards, and I put my name and pronouns on mine; many students do the same. Another helpful thing to do is privately ask students their pronouns on the student survey. I have two lines: one asking what their public pronouns are, and another if they'd like to tell me pronouns they use privately. I use these pronouns when I'm one-on-one with the student, but not in class.

Syllabus

Free textbook and course materials

Students should not have to pay for anything in your course. Requiring a paid textbook exacerbates inequality by leaving students who can't afford it without a textbook or spending extra time trying to match pages with a free online version. Find a free textbook that's good enough for the basics, and teach journal articles (made available to students) for anything recent or not covered.

Lateness and absences

Provide a few 'late tickets' that students can use to submit certain assignments late and allow students one or two absences, no questions asked. I've found that students do *not* take advantage of this policy without good reason.

List of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus

On your syllabus, link to a list of gender-neutral bathrooms (if your university provides one). This is not only practical and helpful, but signals to students that your classroom is safe and inclusive from the first day.

Be an advocate for accommodation

Universities vary widely in how well they handle accommodations. If yours handles them poorly, you need to be your students' advocate. What this looks like depends a lot on specifics, but in some cases you can make a difference.

Grading

Where does the variance come from?

For every assignment, ask yourself: is the variance in students' grades coming from things that I taught them? Or, is the variance coming from things external to their knowledge and skills within this class? One clear example is writing skills. I primarily teach psychology classes, where writing skills are important (most classes have a final paper). However, I don't spend any time teaching writing. If I were to include basic writing skills in my rubric (grammar and syntax, topic sentence use, etc.), this would exacerbate inequality between students based on their backgrounds. Since I do not teach writing, I only grade based on use of course skills, like idea generation, study design, and connections to theories.

Rubrics

Always use a grading rubric and provide it to students. Students with more institutional knowledge will have better-calibrated expectations about what they'll be graded on, so to create a fairer baseline, provide the expectations to everyone. This will also help you avoid biases by giving standardized guidelines for when to give and take points.

Blind grading

This seems obvious, but it's surprising how often it's not done. For every assignment that it's possible to grade blindly, do so.

During class

Teach diverse perspectives

Countless classes have at least one lecture on the history of the topic that include slide after slide of white men. Doing this is not only demoralizing to students who are historically underrepresented, but also not always accurate. Just because you learned that the history of your field looked a certain way doesn't mean that there weren't non-white-men doing equally important work. Do more research into the history of your field and highlight work from those underrepresented groups.

Library visit

Students may not know how to find articles, so including a library visit and a Google Scholar primer is a great way to share those resources with everyone.

Diverse examples

This is another basic one, but make sure that your slide images and examples represent your students.

Student-choice groups

Some students might not be comfortable working with some students in the class. For example, a friend's former student felt uncomfortable when other students refused to use her correct pronouns, but she was stuck in a group with them for the whole semester. Besides talking with the disrespectful students, one way to help is to let students choose their own groups.

I hope these specific examples are helpful! At the end of the day, just remember to be kind and explain your reasoning. If you genuinely want the best for your students, and explain why you're making the decisions you are, students are appreciative and understanding.