



3.4.3 Students, learning and diversity

I was sitting there ...with this burden of teaching ...weighing on me ...[and] I ...went, "Oh! It is not just teaching for the good students, it's teaching for the ones who are having a hard time too," which seemed so basic, but it was one of those epiphanies, those little light bulbs that went on ...and so I spent a lot of time over the summer thinking about that and I made a conscious effort to go into the classroom and really pay attention to each individual student. And, so at the beginning of the semester, I would walk into the class ...shake everyone's hands, make sure I knew their names, find out what was going on. I made sure I got to class early so that the students who were there early I could talk to ...and get to know them as real people rather than who I expected them to be in an academic classroom—does that make sense? (Holly)

As a new teacher Holly struggled to understand the diverse motivations, needs and learning abilities of her students. She had originally approached her teaching in terms of her own experience of being a high-achieving student. However, she soon realized the importance of understanding diverse students as key to her teaching success.

While discussions of diversity often focus, quite rightly, on correcting marginalization (e.g., ethnicity, culture, class, physical ability, gender, and sexual orientation) we need to be mindful that each student arrives with different experiences of life and learning. Additionally, teachers need to be alert to the possibility of invisible learning difficulties which students may not wish to reveal. We suggest that you provide private opportunities for disclosure and emphasize to students the value of this to help you better respond to their needs. Due to the range of needs within any student cohort, we need to provide diverse opportunities to learn including the type of assessments.

NB assumptions about teaching and learning are culturally embedded, so we cannot expect students from diverse cultures to share the same views of what should happen in a classroom.

The following checklist for avoiding common problems is an excellent starting point to make your teaching more inclusive

1. Avoid idiomatic English: Idioms may be confusing for both non-native speakers and students from other English-language countries. Remember that while metaphorical expressions may be colorful, students may miss an important concept if the phrase is unfamiliar (e.g., "once in a blue moon," "between a rock and a hard place").



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2. Provide linguistic redundancy: Many students, particularly non-native speakers of English or those with visual or auditory problems, benefit from both seeing and hearing language (e.g., through the use of the whiteboard or overhead projector) and from hearing key ideas stated in different ways. Providing teaching materials online and including videos of your lectures will help some students to consolidate their learning after face-to-face sessions.
3. Use diverse examples that draw on a range of backgrounds and experiences: Examples that come easily are often those which come from our own experiences; make sure you aren't assuming that all your students share that experience. Review your teaching materials to see if they are based on cultural or regional knowledge, hobbies favored predominantly by one gender, or political or historical knowledge unfamiliar to those from other countries.
4. Do not assume that students who stay silent in face-to-face discussions don't know the material. In some cultures being quiet in the classroom and not "showing off" are considered respectful. Also be mindful that for some students silence in the classroom may have been learned in response to negative experiences with participation (e.g., being interrupted by others, not getting credit for their ideas, having others talk to them in a condescending or dismissive way).
5. Watch the type of humour that occurs in your classes. Not only may humour not travel well across cultures, a surprisingly large number of jokes involve denigrating people who are perceived to be different to mainstream society and who may already feel marginal.

Finally, while it is important to be respectful of your students and mindful of addressing their varied needs, you also need to create boundaries as Cathy learned:

I had to figure out how not to ...be so much on the side of the students all the time ...that I ...had boundaries and [to] be careful about how available I am, for example, and that student needs are often high, but that doesn't mean that I need to be responsive immediately 'cause I have to look at my own needs as well.

Additional resources

Diversity is a term that can have many different meanings depending on context. The following link leads you to an explanation about issues related to diversity when teaching and also provides a set of resources: <https://ctl.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/diversity-classroom>.

NB: While this is written from a US perspective, the issues are pertinent globally.



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