

Sent: Friday, August 7, 2020 3:42 PM

To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU

Subject: Special Summer Teaching Toolbox: Inclusive Teaching

Special Summer Teaching Toolbox

Inclusive Teaching

by Andreas Broscheid

As the Black Lives Matter protests revived this summer, there have been increased calls for [inclusive](#), [antiracist](#), [culturally responsive](#), and other teaching approaches that focus on JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion). [These are not the same things](#), and we thought it was worth focusing on these different concepts in different toolboxes (stay tuned!). Inclusive teaching is about [“creating equitable and welcoming educational environments for the diverse learners in our classrooms.”](#) The focus of inclusive teaching is to make sure all qualified students are included in the learning community in our classes as equal members, with equal opportunities to learn and to succeed, independently of their socioeconomic background, racial-ethnic-cultural identity, gender and gender expression, sexual orientation, disability status, and the like. While inclusive teaching can be compatible with other forms of JEDI-oriented teaching and should ground the latter, it does not necessarily transform and decenter the curriculum from the Eurocentric traditions that feed the content in many disciplines. In other words, inclusive teaching may attempt to include minoritized students in a class community that is still dominated by white perspectives, institutions, traditions, ways of knowing, and other ways in which white supremacy structures our learning environments (see e.g., [Haynes 2017](#)).

Here, I'd like to summarize a few of the key principles of inclusive teaching that form the basis of a [reflection tool](#) that two colleagues—[Ed Brantmeier](#) at CFI and [Carl Moore](#) at the University of the District of Columbia—and I developed a number of years ago. “The tool” is not exactly a cookbook for creating inclusive courses, but it does raise a number of questions that are important to consider as we try to make our classes more inclusive. When we created the tool, Ed suggested making a distinction between course context, course subtext, and course text. Let's take a look what these can practically mean for our teaching:

The **course context** is very similar to what [L. Dee Fink](#) calls “situational factors”: class size and scheduling, departmental and disciplinary expectations for what the course should teach, whether the course is used as a prerequisite for other courses, and so on. Two factors that should be particularly highlighted in the context of inclusive teaching are the students and the course content. The first question to ask is how we can find out who our students are and what they bring to the class. [What do they already know about the class material, and how can we build on their knowledge to help them learn more?](#) How can we connect the class material [to the students' lived experiences](#)? What might motivate the students? (And what might demotivate them?) How do these factors differ from student to student, and how can we adapt the course to the various interests, existing knowledge, and experiences of the students? These questions can be answered through a range of approaches: anonymous surveys in large classes, introductory class discussions, even student involvement in the design of (parts of) the syllabus.

The second set of questions, about the course content, is related to the first: What content is generally expected by the discipline, by the department, by a group of instructors teaching different sections of the same course, to be “covered” in the course? And, within this agreed-upon content, what are the different perspectives, interests, applications, etc., that are usually included, and do they correspond to

the interests, experiences, and motivations of the students in the class? In some disciplines, perspective-taking is explicitly part of the content, for example, if there are societal and scholarly disagreements about how particular concepts should be defined, and the perspectives included in the course content can be adapted based on student interests. That's frequently the case in my own discipline, political science. In other disciplines, perspective-taking is more subtle and often implicit; think about STEM disciplines, in which methods and findings are often very clearly defined and not thought to be subject to different perspective taking. What's more malleable, however, are the applications and examples used to teach content: How are scientific findings determined to be important? Do they serve economic or social interests? Whose? How can we make sure that all of our students find that what they learn is in some way relevant to their lived experience?

Besides course context, there is also a **course subtext**. Some of this is connected to the course content, as our classes, either implicitly or even explicitly, teach values in addition to intellectual or cognitive content. These values can be rationality, empathy, discipline and punctuality, creativity, non-emotionality, and more. Frequently, these values, even though they are often central to disciplinary identities, are not explicitly taught but form part of a "hidden curriculum"—[the unstated assumptions, definitions, values, behaviors, and demands that influence whether students will succeed or not](#). As part of inclusive teaching, we have to ask ourselves whether these unstated course elements are justified, whether they are things that students need to learn, whether they advantage some students from the start, or whether they are traditions or habits that impose barriers to the successful inclusion of some students. If elements of the hidden curriculum are important learning goals, [we'll have to "unhide" them](#). If they are not important learning goals, we'll have to drop them.

Subtext is also an important element in parts of the course readings and other materials. For example, it can be quite instructive to look at the images that textbooks use to illustrate the text. Who is represented in those images? In the Introduction to U.S. Government textbooks that I consider for my classes, for example, the only Black faces can be found in the chapter on civil rights. (The election of Barack Obama obviously helped to change this pattern a little bit, but only a little bit.) In a similar vein, it can be instructive to look at the examples used in textbooks and their authors: Are they all guys? How many women scientists are mentioned? Going beyond textbooks, we may want to look at other materials that we assign. What are the creators' identities? From what position(s) are they working? What message(s) do they send about our disciplines?

Questions about class readings get us to the **course text**, obviously, though we did not think about text as simply written, printed material, but all types of text we use in our classes: syllabi, sure, as well as readings or videos (they usually are based on scripts!), but also course assignments, verbally stated learning goals and class announcements, ways in which we talk to students, and the like. Here, one of the big themes for us was [transparency](#): Do we clearly communicate what we want our students to learn, what that learning will look like, and what students have to do in order to be successful? Or do we assume (see hidden curriculum above) that they will figure these things out on their own? Another important theme is accessibility: At the most basic level, is the class material, are the class communications, accessible to all students? Of course, we are legally required to [accommodate students with documented disabilities](#), but getting such documentation is costly and time consuming, which means that students with disabilities are often not able to document them and thus rely on us to make course materials accessible for everyone, even in the absence of an access plan. (And, as somebody who likes to listen to news articles read by Siri on his commute, I know that accessible texts are preferable not only if you have a disability.) For more on access for everyone, [check out the literature on Universal Design \(for Learning\)](#).

The course text raises a range of additional questions related to inclusion: Is the tone of our communications inviting, or are they rulebooks that try to control students' learning down to the last detail? Do we communicate and [practice care](#) for our students—particularly important in the current “[triple pandemic](#)” of COVID-19, racism, and economic crisis? Do we address a range of student identities, interests, and experiences, or do we (implicitly or explicitly) assume that all students are the same? Do we employ a range of class assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways, or do we expect students to do so in one particular way, in one format? Do we rely on a large number of low-to-medium stakes assessments, or do we rest the whole course grade on a small number of high stakes assessments that disadvantage students with test anxiety, say? How do we facilitate interaction in the (virtual or physical) classroom, to make sure all students find they can (and do) participate? Finally, how do I respond to heated moments in the classroom, to possible micro- (or macro-) aggressions among students, and how do I avoid contributing to them myself? How can I make sure that students feel like they can be brave to embrace the discomfort that comes with meaningful learning?

There is more; take a look at [our inclusive teaching form](#) (and at [this guide](#), [another guide](#), [this article](#), and [an application to the Zoom platform](#) that we found all helpful). Because, in a sense, inclusive teaching is not some special teaching that's used for special types of classes or by special types of instructors, but it is simply [good teaching](#) that we should all aim for.

About the author: Andreas Broscheid as an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and a professor in the [Department of Political Science](#). He can be reached at broschax@jmu.edu.

For more information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, please visit:
<https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>
