Practical strategies: Culturally inclusive learning environments

There are diverse ideas about what constitutes good teaching and learning. These ideas are influenced by a person's own culture and life experiences. A significant part of what occurs in schools is framed by cultural 'rules' that are often unconsciously agreed upon and applied in our daily routines. This includes the ways teaching occurs, how we perceive learning occurs, the curriculum intent, design and content, and our attitudes and values about schooling and life in our communities.

Culture is often simply taken for granted. The invisibility of culture in educational settings can have unintended consequences. Teachers, education support workers and students might be unaware that what they say, do or teach in the classroom could seem strange or offensive to others. Sometimes doing what seems 'normal' unintentionally excluding others from participating fully.

Thinking about culture

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and others' is noticing what you find surprising, or perhaps offensive, about differences in everyday behaviour between someone from a different cultural group and yourself. When this happens think about what cultural 'rules' the other person and you might be using (Carroll, 2000). Expectations about roles, responsibilities and relationships of teachers and student can vary.

Questions to guide reflection

What can I say about myself and my own culture?

- What national, ethnic or religious group(s) do I belong to? How does my teaching reflect this?
- What seems normal or strange to me? What sort of student/staff behaviour am I most familiar or comfortable with? What surprises or challenges me?
- What experiences do I have as a result of studying/working in different cultures and how can I use this?

What do I know about my student and staff colleagues?

- What do I know about the cultural and education systems of my students and staff colleagues?
- How current/accurate is my information?
- What do I know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history?

Strategies for designing a culturally inclusive teaching and learning environment

Introductions

- Set up an introduction system so that all students can get to know something about you, their class colleagues and the diversity of experience in the class

Establish appropriate modes of address

- If you interact one on one with students, ask what form of address they prefer
- Use inclusive language that does not assume Western name forms
    - 'family' name, not 'last' name
    - 'given' name, not 'Christian' name
- Students from more formal educational cultures, where status differences related to age or educations qualifications are important, might be uncomfortable in addressing teaching staff by their given names. A compromise can be for students to use your title and given name e.g., 'Professor Marie,' 'Dr Ivan'
- If in doubt, ask

Make the class a safe place for all students

- Establish a classroom in which teachers and students demonstrate **mutual respect**
- Manage behaviour that might stimulate 'classroom incivilities'
    - Teacher incivility can include:
        - Prejudice and
        - Neglecting the needs of individual students or groups of students
    - Student incivility can manifest as:
        - Poor punctuality
        - Lack of preparation for or non-participation in classes
        - Disruption of classes
        - Distraction of teacher and fellow students, and cheating.

For strategies for managing classroom incivility, see Boice, R. (1996). *First Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process.* Anker Publishing Company, Bolton, M.

- Establish inclusive class ground rules that safeguard against racism and harassment
- In small classes, guide students to negotiate their own code of conduct
- In larger classes, provide a framework and ask for student feedback and ratification of ground rules
- Define how class members discuss issues, especially potentially sensitive issues. For example, people must have valid support/evidence for what they say'
- Consider the impacts, both personal and academic, of the classroom environment on student identity. For example, be mindful that you may have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in your class, though for historical or personal reasons they may not necessarily have identified as such

For more about ground rules and strategies see *Practical strategies for Inclusive practices for managing controversial issues.*

Appreciate the challenges and adjustment process

- Recognise that while you may be knowledgeable on matters in your own culture and discipline, it is both respectful and recommended that you take the time to listen, learn and reflect on the diversity of other cultures, e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- When people live and work in a new culture, they may experience 'culture shock.' This is characterised by a series of phases influencing how people perceive and respond to others and events around them.
- Recognise that people for whom English is a second language or subsequent language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture
- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to 'talk down' or to talk simplistically to international students or local speakers of other languages if English is not their first language

Treat diversity positively

- Avoid over generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative) e.g., 'All Asian students are quiet in class'
- Do not expect any individual student to speak as a representative of his/her culture
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource
- Plan opportunities for all students to contribute input related to their own culture (but avoid making any student a cultural representative)

Establish clear expectations in the classroom

- Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work
- Check that your students understand the school context and what is expected of them
- Clarify the format and purpose of the particular session type you are delivering and the type of student participation expected
- Explain the written topic outlines, objectives and outcomes that are provided to students, checking that everyone understands
- Let students know if the emphasis is on communicating information and ideas or language accuracy.