Inclusive Teaching Tips 1.0

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Staff Alliance for Equity (SAFE)
Leiden University

Preamble

University leaders around the world have increasingly vowed to make the classroom a welcoming and diverse place, where different talents can be nurtured. Meanwhile, educators aspire to help students grow into engaged and empowered members of society, equipped with the intellectual tools they need to tackle the complex, protracted challenges that we collectively face.

Course design and implementation must mirror these commitments to inclusion and rigour. To be inclusive, our teaching must minimize the formal and informal, visible and invisible barriers to participation that students may face due, for instance, to their socioeconomic status, gender or racial identity, or physical and learning abilities. Our teaching must also counteract the narrative that there is one and only one perspective from which to view the world.

Failure to do so can frustrate a sense of belonging among specific students who

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may feel underrepresented, under-valued or excluded. Moreover, it deprives all students of a learning environment where engaged peers participate at their fullest, and where new ways of knowing complement and confront the old. Tackling social challenges of enormous proportions demands nothing less.

Inclusive Teaching Tips 1.0 are here to support educators interested in leading courses and classrooms with these principles in mind. They draw from existing efforts and resources, as well as countless conversations with colleagues and friends.

Still, they are inevitably imperfect and non-exhaustive. They should be considered neither authoritative nor final. There is no substitute for open-mindedness and humility in the path to inclusive teaching. At the same time, no meaningful change has ever eschewed reflection and dialogue. In what follows we aspire to stimulate both.

How to use these tips

The document is structured as follows. Tips are formulated as questions and grouped into headers, roughly arranged in chronological stages of course design and implementation.

This is not a rulebook, so start wherever you want and move at your own speed. This is a journey, not a race.

Green boxes like this one contain justifications and/or explanations for the tips provided.

Speech bubbles like this one display examples from teachers.

Useful resource suggestions will appear in a circle like this one.

Sources are cited in short-hand, below (like this) and fully in the bibliography at the end.

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1. Partner up

a. Am I planning to revisit my course material alone or with colleagues? If the latter, do I choose colleagues who differ from me in discipline, methodological preference, background, or school of thought?

b. Will I openly ask for feedback from former students on my course material?

c. Will I enter into dialogue with critique that I do not understand?

Just as many of our biases are implicit, many of the potentially exclusive elements of our perspective are deeply ingrained in our thinking and are likely to escape our own attention. For example, one common manifestation of bias is the accidental erasure or neglect of particular experiences and perspectives. Working in silos, it is going to be extremely difficult to recognize what we, by definition, are not seeing.

"I made plans to exchange syllabi with a new colleague over coffee. I also included questions on representation and a sense of belonging in anonymous student evaluation forms in the middle of my course."

2. Reading list

You might have heard of the importance of scanning your reading list for its balance of gender, ethnic, etc. identities among authors. 'Why does this matter?' 'Isn't what I have assigned already sufficient for the content?' 'I don't care about someone's identity, I care about their ideas.' These are all fair points!

Epistemological diversity – that is, diversity of knowledge systems and paradigms – helps students critically evaluate specific assumptions and motivations, bring opposing viewpoints into dialogue with one another, foster a deeper understanding of complex problems and ultimately develop sounder arguments.

a. Have I thought about whose perspectives need to be included on the topic I am teaching? Do authors from social positions different from those of my main sources also feature in my curriculum? What about stakeholders, affected parties, and target groups?

b. For whom have I designed my course? Who is my target student? If I imagine them with different backgrounds, culture, languages and schooling, would I change anything about my reading list?[1]

Professor Manjeet Ramgotra (SOAS) taught Aristotle's *The Politics* alongside bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* to challenge some of Aristotle's gender and racial hierarchies.[2]

[1] Morreira, S. & Luckett, K. (2018) Questions academics can ask to decolonise their classrooms.

[2] Mumford, D. et al. (2020) Where do we go from here? Decolonising teaching and learning at LUC.

2. Reading list

The logic behind checking whether our authors represent diverse identities stems from the reality that where we sit informs where we stand. Our lived experiences affect how we look at the world, which in turn matters for what we see in it. In today's world, certain expressions of gender, sexuality, culture, etc, as well as social markers like race, have political implications: they can affect how many rights and resources we have, independent of our merit and our ideas.

Scanning for author identity is a meaningful first step, but it is an imperfect proxy for epistemological diversity. Here, we provide tips that take this into account.

c. In what ways do I encourage my students to engage with historically marginal voices?

d. Do the authors on my assigned reading list reflect different identities and backgrounds?

Jane Sumner's *Gender Balance Assessment Tool* uses gender and race algorithm tools by Kamil Wais, Kabir Khanna, and Kosuke Imai to scan your reading list for you.

"It didn't necessarily take a lot of time to scan my reading list. I already had a pretty good sense of who the authors were that I was assigning. What could have taken time was fixing the imbalance, but I opted to crowdsource. I asked for recommendations from my network on Twitter, LinkedIn, and via email. Within an hour I had a list of 10 names that I was lucky enough to be introduced to!"

3. Planning lectures

a. Do I articulate the social position from which I speak when I lecture? What about my intellectual position?

b. Will my lessons allow less vocal or eloquent students to feel comfortable participating? Am I aware of why less vocal students might be less vocal? Do I engage different learning modalities? Do I allow for different forms of participation (e.g. anonymous vs. non-anonymous, group discussion vs. bilateral discussion, presentations)?

See Bourke (2014) for an explanation and examples of positionality.

Education Endowment Foundation (2021) explains the latest research on learning modalities.

For some time, teachers were expected to accommodate the 'learning style' of individual students. Recent research in neuroscience, education and psychology has shown that there is limited evidence to support that specific students are best suited to specific modalities. Instead, learning preferences change over time and in different situations. The evidence suggests that representing ideas in varied modalities is valuable as long as it is not attached to the assumption of an individual learning style. Some examples of these modalities could be: multiple choice vs. essays, discussion, visuals (powerpoints, drawings, graphs), movement activities, videos, podcasts, readings, role play, etc.

Moreover, drawing from a variety of cases may provide more students with the possibility to relate to the material. This may help facilitate a sense of belonging. Our examples do not need to perfectly match our students' life-worlds, but if the examples given in class never match their life-worlds, they might not feel as though the course was designed for them.

3. Planning lectures

c. Do I use examples and cases from different communities? Will I make room for relevant personal experiences to be shared; if so, how will they be tied to other content and used for reflection?

d. Do I use examples and cases as opportunities to stimulate reflection on issues of social importance (for example: poverty reduction, LGBT rights)? Or do I use examples that further enforce specific ways of knowing (for example, using the gender binary as an example of a nominal scale in a methods course)?

e. Do I use examples or content that refers to physical, mental or sexual violence, abuse, slurs, drug use, suicide or something that might unintentionally trigger anxiety, trauma responses or a feeling of exclusion? Will I include content notes?

Finally, content warnings are verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive or hurtful content – note that this is not synonomous with offensive, disagreeable or even unpleasant content, nor are the warnings intended as censorship. Instead, content warnings are about giving vulnerable students who have experienced trauma the freedom to manage their exposure to distressing material. Victims of violence and assault may otherwise shut down, dissociate, panic, suffer setbacks and/or disengage from the class as they manage the symptoms that the material provokes. However, recent research has shown that students typically do not avoid material, even[3] when warned, and indeed that 'warnings' can elicit anticipatory anxiety and/or a sense of vulnerability.[3] Using a "content note," rather than a warning, may help to signal distressing topics without elevating anxiety levels and give students agency without signaling any student out as particularly vulnerable.

[3] Bruce, M. et al. (2021) "Students' psychophysiological reactivity to trigger warnings"

3. Planning lectures

f. Do my guest lecturers have different backgrounds or perspectives than me?

g. Do I make assumptions about students' background knowledge of a subject? If so, do I offer supportive material that can get them up to speed?

"I use Mentimeter or other interactive presentation software from time to time to enable students to think about something out loud and brainstorm, while remaining anonymous."

A 2019 publication from the Cambridge University Students' Union Disabled Students Campaign, 'Content Notes', offers more guidance on their usage

"In my online learning environment, I include a section on prior knowledge. There is a mini-quiz where students can test their prior knowledge, and links to resources that can help them fill the gaps."

4. Communicating expectations

Ground rules are agreements about expected behavior during meetings or classes. Making these expectations explicit helps prevent or reduce misunderstandings and potentially unsafe situations of conflict for students, keeping discussions and disagreements respectful and constructive. They can be developed in a participatory manner, early on in the course, with your Faculty's Code of Conduct as a guideline. Small groups could be asked to come up with their own ideas, and you can offer prompts to stimulate thinking.

Best is to be as specific as possible; norms like "respect differences" are too vague to provide a clear standard. These norms can be referred to when conflict arises (they can't, and shouldn't, of course, prevent disagreement in the first place), and can be revisited throughout the course so that if students want to make adjustments, collectively, they can.

a. Are there ground rules I could introduce to facilitate a more inclusive learning environment? Do I introduce them myself or let them be determined in a bottom-up manner? Will they be communicated and/or announced during class, as a disclaimer in the syllabus, or as an online platform?

Ezra, Ella and Xine, the coordinators of *Trans Studies, Trans Lives: Past, Present, and Future Symposium* at UCL, introduced the following ground rules for their event: (1) Respect the right of others to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own, and recognise that we are all still learning. Be willing to change your perspective, and make space for others to do the same; (2) Listen carefully and politely, and share responsibility for including all voices in the discussion by allowing others to contribute.

(3) Do not engage in private conversations while others are speaking, and ensure that any comments you make reflect that you have paid attention to what the speaker has said; (4) Challenge or criticize ideas, but not people. If someone says something that is incorrect or offensive, do correct them with the aim of building a culture of mutual respect and open dialogue;

(5) Avoid generalisations about groups of people. This includes members of the LGBT community, political parties, religious groups, and particular demographic groups. If you are speaking from your own experience, you should make this clear; (6) Try to support your claims by providing evidence, and if you are not sure something you want to say is factually correct, phrase it as a question.

4. Communicating expectations

"I used to play the 'value game.' I had students list 10 values that they hold dear in order of priority. Once they have their own list, I had them talk to their neighbor and try to combine them. Eventually, we whittled it down to one list of values for the whole group. A follow-up discussion can then be facilitated, with questions like: how many values of yours ended up on the list? How do we form consensus?"

Next, personal pronouns are used when referring to someone in the third person. In Dutch, English, and many other languages, these pronouns are gendered as binary (male or female; e.g. she/her, he/him). Hence, pronouns become a means of signalling our gender to others. However, people do not always experience themselves as falling neatly into binary gender categories. Being given the wrong pronouns can cause discomfort, disrespect and lead to feelings of exclusion and alienation. Because it is not possible to know a person's gender identity by name or by visual appearance alone, understanding how a student wishes to be identified can mitigate the risk of exclusion. One way of getting this information is to ask your students. However, this may put students on the spot. Communicating your own gender pronouns may signal that it is safe for students to do so as well.

b. Am I interested in communicating my own gender pronouns? Do I do this on the syllabus, in my email signature, or at the beginning of class? Do I ask students for theirs? Do I do this privately (via email, or by requesting that they respond if they have specific pronouns they would like me to use)? In the first round of introductions?

For more on gender pronouns, see the LGBTQ+ Resources of the Pride Office at the University of Colorado, Boulder

5. Visual materials

a. Are the visual materials I rely on accessible for students with visual or auditory impairments? Could I make use of larger print, bigger spacing between lines, clearer fonts (sans-serif like Arial or Helvetica)? Could I provide handouts? Could I provide captions for any audio or alternative text for images? Is there sufficient color contrast (i.e. light text on a dark background), and if something is highlighted, is it accompanied by a form of highlighting which is not dependent on colour?

b. Did I take any steps to avoid that my visual materials make use of caricatures or stereotypes of a specific group?

c. Can all of my visual materials be accessed virtually? How do I accommodate students with mobility issues?

d. Are my visual materials clearly structured, with meaningful headings, and meaningful hyperlinks?

Poorly adapted infrastructures and a lack of accessible learning materials are major obstacles toward the participation of students with disabilities, or cognitive, auditory or visual impairments. Approximately 1 billion people worldwide, or 15% of the world's population, are persons with disabilities. Not being able to easily access the materials can not only negatively impact these students' participation and performance but also induce stress and make someone feel unwelcome.

"I use many visual icons and cartoons in my online learning environment. The typical scientist cartoon is a man with grey hair, so I actively searched for cartoons of women scientists and scientists of color."

Microsoft Office has an 'accessibility checker' tool which verifies your file against a set of rules that identify possible issues for people with disabilities.

"I use one summarizing visual to express the content and purpose of the entire course. For every new lecture/topic I use a specific section of that same visual to communicate to students where we are in light of the entire course."

6. Presentation

a. Do I use accessible language? Do I explain jargon, acronyms or idioms when I use them?

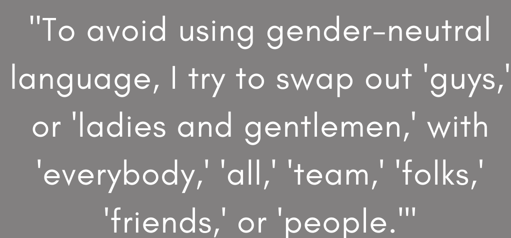
b. Is any of my language potentially stigmatizing, for example, using a negative trait as the defining characteristic of an individual (‘addicts’ instead of ‘persons with drug dependence’)?

c. Do I give students time to process information?

d. Do I describe pertinent parts of graphics and other visuals out loud?

e. Many students (especially those with autism) have sensory sensitivities. If I will make use of flashing images or particularly loud videos, do I flag this in advance?

f. Do I address the group in gender-neutral language?



7. Facilitating participation

a. Do I offer praise and positive reinforcement when students offer insightful comments?

b. Do I value all input, even if it is communicated in ways that differ from my understanding of decorum; for example, that make reference to lived or personal experience, or that take the form of narratives rather than concise remarks? Do I give everyone the opportunity to speak?

In Ch. 12 of bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks discusses how teachers can reproduce classism. by rewarding a particular stoic, obedient demanor associated with white middle classes and punihsing demeanor that diverges from these norms, e.g. loudness, unrestrained laughter or emotional communication.

"One approach is to acknowledge their train of thought, without actively dismissing it. Something like, '*You've thought about X, which is good. We also need to consider Y to get to the conclusion of...*"

c. Do I guide students without shaming them?

d. If I need to divide up the class, how do I split up the students or mix up the group? Does my method ensure gender and skill diversity, and encourage connections across different groups of students?

e. Do I encourage students to share without putting individual students in boxes based on my assumptions of their lived experiences?

Singling out students based on our assumption of their lived experience, due, for instance, to last names, gender presentation or racial identity, can be alarming and can severely compromise trust.

8. Incident management

a. Do I have a strategy to enforce boundaries (for example, of ground rules) when they are broken? Do I convey when behavior is unacceptable?

If there is an incident in the classroom which feels inappropriate or uncomfortable, it is easy to find ourselves lost for words or just not sure how to react at all. Freezing is natural. However, if you feel that the safety of the learning environment is somehow compromised, it is important to react. This will signal to any affected students that they are not alone, and harnesses a learning opportunity for disruptive students.

That said, there is no one right way to respond to an uncomfortable incident. It depends on your relationship to the class, your personality, how students appear to respond, and what the setting is. The 4 D's from bystander intervention trainings are introduced to the left here as heuristics for four different approaches.

In general, it is important to react to the content of the disruptive comment rather than the student, and not to take disruption personally so as to avoid that our reactions only amplify and escalate the disruption. Moreover, students may be unaware that they are being disruptive, and it is important to remain calm, positive, and give them the benefit of the doubt.

Direct action involves responding immediately to an incident through speech or body language. This may look like a group discussion about the comment (reminding students about a rule that was breached), asking other students what they think. Playing dumb ("Can you explain the joke to me? I don't understand why it's funny") can be an effective strategy of exposing bias. Be genuine and curious, and keep asking questions until the comment is simplified to its harmful roots.

Distraction involves diffusing the situation by redirecting attention. This helps prioritize the learning experience of non-disruptive students, as well as potentially protect any student who may be hurt or embarrassed from further harm. It may be appropriate to flag why the comment is unacceptable and explain the decision to carry on (for example, time constraints).

Delegation involves referring to others in positions of more authority. This may mean speaking to study advisors, counselors, or program directors and may be appropriate in extreme cases.

Delay involves waiting to react until later, for instance by saying, "We don't need to get into this right now, but I don't share that belief." This makes it easy for you to come back to the moment at a later point. It may be a useful way to signal solidarity with any affected students while avoiding humiliating a student who was unaware of their disruptiveness.

8. Incident management

b. Will my response avoid humiliating the student?

c. Have I properly understood the situation? Have I paused, and asked questions to ensure I have enough information about the incident? Have I given the student the opportunity to self-correct?

d. Have I threatened an action that I am not able or prepared to enforce (like asking a student to leave the class)?

"I try to remain polite in all situations. It is far better to say, 'I'd like to continue with the class,' or 'This is important, and it is important that you concentrate for the next few minutes,' than 'Don't talk when I'm talking.'"

"One way to do this is to ask, 'What I'm hearing you say is [harmful belief or stereotype]. Is that what you're saying?"

Ch. 6 of Race and Pickford (2007) *Making Teaching Work: 'Teaching Smarter' in Post-Compulsory Education* offers more tips on dealing with disruptive students.

9. Assessment

Every one of us has unconscious biases. When our working memory is overloaded with information, we look for shortcuts. The result is a variety of biases according to which we can end up grading students based on our general impression of them, their participation in class, on their backgrounds or physical traits, or on how their work compares to work by their peers. This is efficient from our brain's perspectives, but it can unfairly impact the grades our students receive if they are not being marked based on the content submitted, but based on a heuristic.[4]

a. Have I implemented anonymized grading?

b. Do I have a detailed rubric to minimize the room for discretion during my grading?

c. Do I communicate the possibilities available for students who need extra facilities during assessment?

d. Do I accommodate religious holidays that I might not be familiar with when I plan my deadlines?

"I make sure that students fasting during Ramadan can take their exam in the morning rather than in the afternoon."

[4] Betterton, K. (2021) "Unconscious bias in assessment: what does the research tell us?"

9. Assessment

Moreover, we often grade students not only on how well they know the content of our course but on how well they perform according to the 'hidden curriculum' – or the "amorphous collection of implicit academic, social, and cultural messages, unwritten rules and unspoken expectations, and unofficial norms, behaviours and values of the dominant-culture context in which all teaching and learning is situated."[5]

Examples include the expectation that students know how to consult certain databases, or understand what is expected when we ask them to "analyze" or "synthesize" in an assignment. Because not all students are exposed to this socioeconomic and cultural context, the playing field is not level.

e. Do I offer background information, context, or examples in my assignment instructions? Do I try to make visible the 'hidden curriculum' by, for instance, elaborating on the structure, length and type of response that is expected, or on how to discern credible sources?

[5]Boston University, 'Teaching the Hidden Curriculum.'

10. Offering & receiving feedback

a. When I offer office hours or feedback sessions, do I take into account public or religious holidays?

b. When a student offers a suggestion, do I take it seriously? Do I summarize the content anonymously and ask a broader group of students whether they would feel comfortable with the proposed amendment?

c. When drafting student recommendations, do I use similar adjectives to describe students of different genders and from different backgrounds? Do I use a student's preferred proonouns?

Teaching is always a two-way street, and this becomes especially apparent at the end of a course, when students are scheduling office hours to talk about final assignments, or ask for reference letters, and we are asking them to evaluate the course. These moments offer important insight into our own teaching, as we learn what students have taken away from the course. Nevertheless it is important to remain sensitive to individual student circumstances as much as possible and to keep our own biases in check.

These moments may also present opportunities to connect with students on a more personal level, which has been shown to correlate with students' academic success.[6] In these instances, however, it is key that we protect our boundaries to avoid jeopardizing our own well-being and, in turn, eroding our professionalism, reliability, and by extension capacities as mentors.

"A particular gray area for many professors... is whether to self-disclose in the classroom or during personal interactions with students. To answer this question, I pull from my training in counseling psychology and internally evaluate the purpose of self-disclosure. If the information I am sharing serves the student and our relationship then I proceed (albeit within a professional manner). For example, I may share my own personal experience with not getting into graduate school the first time I applied as a way to allay some student fears. However, it would be wrong of me to share information as a means to gain something from my students or work through an issue I'm having."[7]

[6] Carlson, S. (2014) "A caring professor may be key in how a graduate thrives."
[7] Wyrick, A. (2017) "Professor Goldilocks and the three boundaries."

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