

TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS IN A RACIALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOM

Topics:

The Cardinal Rule

Questions a teacher might ask to examine his or her own racial or cultural biases in preparation for teaching

What a teacher can do in preparation for class

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Colleges and universities are at a turning point. The student population is more and more diverse, and colleges are experiencing pressure to broaden both their curriculum and the cultural and ethnic representation of their faculty. Teachers of many years are being asked to acknowledge and accept students with perspectives other than their own and to include in their syllabi material that may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Additionally they are being asked to increase their awareness of classroom dynamics and assume an expanded responsibility for the well-being of their students. All of us are asked to reexamine our own assumptions -- about our students, our course content, our universities, and even ourselves. Our collective ability to respond to and be enriched by these challenges will determine the success of our institutions in the next century.

None of this is easy. Among other things, it leaves people feeling uncertain about how to proceed and how to behave. In this context, we have put together this Tip Sheet, with the hopes that it will help people to work in a multicultural university or college with greater effectiveness and pleasure.

When teaching in a multicultural context, we suggest that teachers prepare themselves in several ways. (1) Begin to assess one's own conscious and unconscious biases about people of cultures other than one's own. (2) Plan the course with the multicultural context in mind: to think of syllabi, course assignments, and potential classroom dynamics in these terms. (3) Find ways to make the actual classroom open and safe for all students, and to make the material accessible for all students. (4) Learn how to deal with hot moments and hot topics.

This Tip Sheet provides some suggestions for all of these stages of teaching in a multicultural context. Undoubtedly, readers will have their own suggestions; we would appreciate comments and further thoughts.

THE CARDINAL RULE:

1. Learn as much about and become as sensitive as you can to racial, ethnic, and cultural groups other than your own.

At the same time:

2. NEVER make assumptions about an individual based on the racial, ethnic, or cultural groups he or she belongs to. Treat each student first and foremost as an individual. Get to know students individually.

Questions a teacher might ask to examine his or her own racial or cultural biases in preparation for teaching:

* Am I comfortable around minority students?

* Am I afraid of students whose background differs markedly from my own?

* Am I afraid of the emotional level when there are students of other races and cultures in my classroom?

* Am I afraid minority students might not be fully competitive with the other students? What is my definition of "fully competitive"?

* Do I expect minority students to need extra help?

* Do I call on minority students as often as others?

- * When minority students do answer, am I afraid their answers will not be correct, or that their method of answering will be inappropriate?
- * Do I think that there is one correct or appropriate mode of argument or discussion in class? How open am I to multiple modes of discourse?
- * Do the minority students seem to participate less than others?
- * Do I rationalize or tolerate lack of participation from minority students more than I would for other students? Do I think their silence means ignorance? Do I believe it is culturally based?
- * Do I tend to shelve or "make time later" for minority points of view?
- * If an issue involving race does come up, do I assume the minority student will know most about it? Will not mind acting as the class expert concerning it?
- * How do I behave with minority students who are under-prepared?
- * Does the logic of my classroom hypotheticals or test answers depend upon stereotypical views of minorities?
- * What assumptions do I make about different student groups:
- * Do I imagine that Latinos or African Americans will express their opinions in non-academic language?
- * Do I expect that Asian students will do better than most others?
- * Do I respond to a white student's voice as if it had more intellectual weight?
- * Do I assume that white students will be insensitive, arrogant, and condescending towards persons of color?
- * Do I assume that African Americans or Latinos or other students of color are all alike?
- * Do I assume that when an African American man disagrees he is angry?
- * Do I assume that Asian women are likely to be quiet?

What a teacher can do in preparation for class:

- * Develop a syllabus that explores multiple perspectives on the topic.
- * Develop paper topics that encourage students to explore different racial and cultural perspectives.
- * Assign the work of minority scholars relevant to the topic being studied.
- * Consider how all students would experience the syllabus.
- * Consider whether students of all cultures are likely to have a background in the material.
- * Consider whether different approaches to learning are accounted for.
- * Anticipate sensitive areas in the subject matter being taught.
- * Think in advance about how one might handle sensitive topics or explosive moments.
- * Incorporate multicultural examples, materials, visual aids as much as possible in lectures.
- * Structure project groups, panels, laboratory teams, and the like so that membership and leadership roles are balanced across ethnic and gender groups.

What a teacher can do to be sure the classroom itself is open to all students:

- * Get to know each student individually. Learn their names and how to pronounce them correctly.
- * Divide the class into smaller groups, each with the responsibility of reporting on the material from the viewpoint of a particular minority group.
- * Ask students to locate cultural or even discriminatory content in textbooks or other materials.
- * Ask for each student's thoughts about the subject, acknowledging the statement of each as it is made. This lets students know from the very beginning that their thoughts have a place in the classroom, that there are differences, and that the differences will be tolerated.
- * Make it safe for everyone to voice their views by accepting all views as worthy of consideration. Don't permit scapegoating of any student or any view. Team up with a student who is alone out on a limb.

- * Present all sides of an issue. Play the devil's advocate for the least popular view.
- * Ask students to research the position they are least comfortable with and come prepared to articulate a defense of that posture.
- * Acknowledge racial and cultural differences in the room. Ask students to discuss racial tensions or cultural outlooks when they come up in class or in the materials.
- * Make the classroom norms explicit.
- * Keep expectations high and provide the support required to meet these expectations.
- * Be careful about the language you use, avoiding terms or expressions, like "black sheep," that might be offensive. If you use fictitious names or examples in discussions or on exams, use names from a variety of cultures.
- * Avoid discussing particular racial groups or race-related issues with a focus that is derogatory or stereotypical to the race. e.g., talking about blacks only in the context of ghettos, welfare, or gangs.
- * Use eye contact with all students; be open and friendly outside of class.

What a teacher can do to handle hot moments:

- * Ask students, when there is a particularly heated exchange, to step back and see how they might make something positive of this exchange, what they can learn from it. This can move the discussion to a broader, more general level that helps everyone to see what issues have been at stake and what the clash itself might mean.
- * Ask students to think about how their reactions mirror the subject at hand, and what they might learn about the subject from their own behavior. Often groups act out or replicate in their own discussion the topic under discussion. Thus a discussion of a case in which race is a factor which has been denied may mirror the case by avoiding the issue of race. Seeing this can enhance people's understanding of the issues.
- * If a student makes a blatantly racist assertion or there is a particularly charged discussion, stop the class and give all the students an assignment for the next class meeting to research this statement and write a short essay about their findings. Alternatively, ask students to write about the issue for five minutes in class. This enables students to think about and come to some kind of terms with the issue

and can enable further discussion of it.

- * Go around the room and ask each student who has spoken (and others if they wish) to state his or her view and explain the reasoning behind it. Every student is heard and the class can be enriched by the range of perceptions.

- * Use the passion as a vehicle to talk about differences in kinds and levels of discourse: who is comfortable with emotion and who is not, who favors personalizing material and who prefers to keep it abstract, whether or not there are cultural differences that underlie these differences.

- * Use the passion and arguments to look at how group dynamics work -- who speaks and who does not, who allies him or herself with whom, who plays what role -- and to think about how the group wants to work.

In short, the teacher will have to decide whether to stop the emotional charge and go on, or whether to use it to explore the topic at hand. Often when things get most hot, people are most capable of learning at a very deep level, if the exchange among students is properly handled. To make this possible, however, requires comfort with feelings and with conflict and enormous skill on the part of the teacher.

Some helpful definitions:

We have been helped by the following definitions, which distinguish between racism and other realities often associated with discussions of race.

- * **Prejudice:** prejudgment on insufficient grounds; can be positive or negative.

- * **Bigotry:** more intensive form of prejudice and carries the negative side of prejudgment.

- * **Stereotyping:** attributing characteristics to a group simplistically and uncritically.

- * **Discrimination:** the act or practice of according differential treatment to persons on the basis of group categories such as race, religion, sex, class.

- * **Scapegoating:** assigning blame or failure to persons or groups in place of other persons or groups to whom blame or failure actually belongs.

- * **Racism:** a set of attitudes, behaviors, and social structures that differentiates on the basis of race. It involves four essential elements:

- * **Power:** the capacity to make and enforce decisions is disproportionately or unfairly distributed.
- * **Resources:** access to such resources as money, education, information, etc. is unequal.
- * **Standards:** standards for appropriate behavior are ethnocentric, reflecting the norms and values of the dominant society.
- * **Problem Defining:** reality is defined by naming the problem incorrectly and thus misplacing it.

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