

Diversity Issues for the Instructor: Identifying Your Own Attitudes

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When we speak of multicultural dynamics in the classroom, we usually focus on the diversity of the students in the room. We often forget that the teacher also brings a range of diversity issues to the classroom. Every instructor brings his or her physical appearance and culture into the room at the same time as the students do. How you look, how you speak, how you act upon your opinions of the role of academics (and particularly of the class you teach), and the extent to which these differ from the physical, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds of your students will have a profound effect on the interactions in your classroom. Thus, you need to be aware of possible reactions among the students to your race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical attributes, and abilities. Preparing for such reactions will involve not only knowing as much as you can about your students, but also turning the mirror to yourself, and finding out more about your own diversity issues.

You might identify your own attitudes toward diversity by remembering certain pivotal moments in your life. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Recall the incident in which you first became aware of differences. What was your reaction? Were you the focus of attention or were others? How did that affect how you reacted to the situation?
- What are the “messages” that you learned about various “minorities” or “majorities” when you were a child? At home? In school? Have your views changed considerably since then? Why or why not?
- Recall an experience in which your own difference put you in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the people directly around you. What was that difference? How did it affect you?
- How do your memories of differences affect you today? How do they (or might they) affect your teaching?

Teachers should be aware of the comfort level they have in discussing these topics before they enter a classroom. It is crucial to understand how you feel about these issues and what you would say in a room where some may not understand your particular position. If diversity becomes a topic of discussion in the class, students will expect the teacher to be able to explain her or his perspective. Try to have thought of a formulation that clarifies your perspective, while leaving enough room for your students’ perspectives in the discussion. You may look like you “belong to” a minority, or to a majority, even if you do not. Either way, your students will initially perceive this to the exclusion of your own diverse experiences, intentions, background, etc. until they get to know you better.

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KEY POINTS TO NOTE:

- a) the power that professors have (that many new profs might be aware of), and how seemingly innocent comments may be perceived in a negative way. Also, that small gestures or comments of support go a long way to build trust in a student who might be alienated otherwise.
- b) the fact that "ism's" occur among students. Often, especially in discussions, students may say hurtful things without even realizing it. These comments often cause the person who is receiving the comments to withdraw and not participate.
- c) faculty can be proactive in limiting the damage from such incidents. In order to create an environment conducive to productive discussions, let students know your expectations for the way they communicate with others (including you) in the classroom. As the instructor, you play an important role as a facilitator and supporter in your students’ efforts to achieve respectful ways of communicating in the classroom.