

Small steps instructors can take to build more inclusive classrooms (opinion)

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The spring 2020 semester was unlike any other in the history of higher education due in large part to the COVID-19 crisis. Having access to a reliable computer and Wi-Fi as well as a dedicated space for classwork, along with balancing the demands of home and college life, were just a few of the many equity challenges that students faced during the abrupt switch to remote learning. Although colleges have more time to prepare this fall, concerns about equity and inclusion are still apparent. Fostering inclusive classrooms is vital, and all instructors can take certain small steps to start building such learning environments from the start of the course, regardless of modality.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic's rippling effects, we collaboratively undertook a project at our two institutions -- the University of Saint Joseph and Lafayette College -- to provide instructors with support to create more equitable and inclusive courses. With feedback from students, faculty members and administrators, we co-developed a survey tool, the Who's in Class? Form, that enables learners to voluntarily and anonymously share items at the beginning of the course that they wanted their instructors to know to help create more inclusive classrooms. Question topics include students' first-generation status, access to technology, obligations outside of college, disability considerations and other demographic information.

The form also gave students an opportunity to provide additional information about themselves that could influence their achievement in the course or that they wanted their instructor to know to make them feel more included. Taking into account the input from our student collaborators when we designed the tool, instructors received the results in aggregate to minimize the chance of being able to identify specific learners. Students advocated for this approach so that they and their peers felt more comfortable completing the form. At any point during the course, individual students could also choose to disclose what they wrote on the form to their instructor. Also, normal usage of

the form involves clearing the responses at the end of the academic year.

Instructors used this tool at our institutions during the first week of classes during the spring 2020 semester in five different courses that were face-to-face, online, introductory, advanced or master's level. The overall response rate for the questionnaire was 69 percent across these courses. The students shared information about themselves that may have otherwise gone unrecognized without the form.

The instructors partnered with the Center for Teaching and Learning at Lafayette College to make an action plan for their inclusive teaching efforts, essentially taking small steps to tweak their course to make it more equitable and welcoming for their learners. They made changes such as:

- not assuming students had prior knowledge on course topics and providing more instructional supports;
- eliminating high-cost course materials and supporting students in using earlier editions of textbooks;
- highlighting diverse individuals in the field;
- co-developing collaborative classroom guidelines with students; and
- providing alternative assignments for students who were unable to attend class for health or other reasons.

Student responses to the form also served as an entry point for the instructors to initiate a conversation with their learners about why having an inclusive classroom environment was important. Little did these instructors know that a viral pandemic would disrupt their courses, making usage of the tool even more valuable as face-to-face courses shifted to remote.

Student comments on the perceived impact of the form at the end of the atypical semester were positive, with only a small minority of students indicating that they were unsure how their instructor used the information on the form. Below are several representative comments:

- “My professor really tried to get to know everyone in the class and make sure everyone felt like a valued participant despite the issues with the pandemic. I think this form really helped them to do this.”
- “I think this allowed my professor to really get to know the students more (especially in a larger lecture class) and relate to us continually throughout the semester, even when we were learning online.”
- “It made people feel more included and represented in the classroom.”
- “The use of this form demonstrated the importance of the diversity of our class to my instructor. I too think it is important to acknowledge especially when dealing with classes that require discussion and sharing of ideas and opinions. That's where diversity is key.”

After the semester ended, the instructors who distributed the form to their students provided their perspective on the benefit of its use in their classes. Some of their comments were:

- “Over all, I got the feeling that just by implementing this questionnaire my students knew that I cared about them as people, recognized that each was different and valuable to the class, and took my job of working with them to support their learning as important. Moreover, through its use, I learned attributes and characteristics of students in my class that I would not have otherwise known.”
- “The form was critical in helping me to build my classroom community. Students felt their differences were celebrated and appreciated, and I was able to see individuals as whole students. That helped to minimize perceived and real learning barriers, affirmed their abilities, and encouraged them to challenge themselves. I was able to tailor my course to the particular cohort in the room, and that made all the difference both face-to-face and online.”

While designing inclusive courses is essential for effective teaching -- whether we are teaching during a pandemic or in normal times; teaching online, hybrid or face-to-face courses; or teaching undergraduate or graduate-level courses -- the uncertainty of this coming fall makes it more important than ever to address inclusion concerns. In preparing for the fall semester, we encourage instructors to craft their own anonymous and voluntary forms, as well as to seek feedback from their institution’s center for teaching and learning and their colleagues to design more inclusive courses.

Such tools can include questions that give students an opportunity to share their access needs for digital technologies in online learning, accommodations for learning, financial limitations for purchasing course materials and challenges with home and work responsibilities, as well as other aspects of their personal social identities that can impact their course experience. Instructors can then make modifications as appropriate and feasible to build inclusive courses for their learners.

For our part, we plan to continue to support instructors in using the form while we further assess its efficacy, and we’ll share the tool in our forthcoming book for other instructors to adapt and use in their courses. We are hopeful that starting this conversation will allow all of us to reflect on how we can teach inclusively during the pandemic this fall and into the future by taking just a few small steps that can have a profound impact on our classroom environments.

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