Duke University Thompson Writing Program

Best Practices: Enhancing Inclusivity of Multilingual Multicultural Students

Class Culture and Structure

Actively aim to establish an inclusive class culture that welcomes and respects diversity. Apprise students that you expect respectful spoken and written interactions, including in Sakai forums and during pair or group work that occurs outside class. Realize that some students might feel apprehensive about their possible acceptance by classmates due to xenophobic or racist rhetoric or incidents they may have experienced or seen through the media.

Including pair and group work during class enables students to collaborate with peers as well as gain confidence in sharing their ideas. Interspersing these activities with full class and individual work can assist in further engaging your students.

Assignment Culture

When possible, incorporate readings by authors with diverse backgrounds and invite your students to incorporate their cultural backgrounds and knowledge into an assignment.

Exercise caution when designing assignments that require students to create social media or other public-facing materials. Certain forms of personal expression tolerated in the U.S. might not be considered acceptable in their homelands. A University of Minnesota student was arrested upon returning home to China for having posted government critiques on social media during his time studying in the United States. While those posts were not for a course, it's important to recognize that international students need to consider how their government might react to something they share via the internet.

Language and Pacing

If you tend to speak and teach quickly, slow down your pace of speaking and of teaching new concepts. When your students speak quickly, you might repeat or rephrase their key comments. Try to face your students as much as possible while speaking. Watch for maintaining speaking volume, which can tend to drop off at the ends of sentences once you've spoken for some time.

Be aware of your use of possibly unfamiliar vocabulary, acronyms, idiomatic or metaphorical language, or cultural references. Whether you are incorporating these in class or students are, explain the most important uses of possibly incomprehensible language.

Written Scaffolding

Provide written support for important points during class when possible. Share major discussion questions and peer review texts ahead of time. If you will have students read aloud from texts during class, provide all students in your section with access to the written versions of those texts. Do not assume that students will have the ability to easily absorb material through listening alone.

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Participation Management

Provide a variety of opportunities so that students can participate through speaking in small groups, sharing through online forums and virtual chat, or other options.

Consider de-emphasizing participation in your grading. Student silence during class demonstrates respect in some cultures as does not disagreeing with a professor or classmates. Some students might be uncomfortable with voicing their opinions on sensitive issues. Provide additional pause time, delaying responses a bit after posing a question to allow students to better consider their response or possibly translate their answer into English.

Do not allow certain students to dominate the airwaves during class. Their voices limit the participation of others, who will tire of hearing particular classmates repeatedly speak. Let your class know you would like to hear from someone new.

Scaffold participation. You might provide written questions several days in advance of a class discussion, asking students to bring written answers to class. You could have students individually write on a topic in class or have them discuss a question in pairs or groups before you call on individuals. Gently call on quieter students, inviting them to share the gist of what was said in a small group or share their thoughts on a question they've written a response to. You could ask a quiet student to consider reading aloud a short paragraph (of an essay, reading, assignment description) that seems accessible in content and pronunciation.

Invite each student into the conversation. If students can find their voice in your classroom, their confidence will grow and they might carry that newfound voice into their other classrooms.

Assignment Feedback and Peer Review

When commenting on assignments, aim to prioritize content and other global issues (e.g., thesis statement, evidence) as well as key material that you've specifically taught. Address language concerns that impede clarity and comprehension rather than those that do not. Encourage students to do the same during peer review sessions.

Share your appreciation for the diversity of writing cultures reflected in student texts. Keeping in mind that not all cultures of writing will privilege (among other things) concision, fronting a thesis statement, or clarifying what or who each pronoun (e.g., it, they, he, she) represents, share the context of your feedback: In US academic writing in the discipline of x, the thesis statement...

Students' Right to Their Own Language

Consider ways in which you might create space for multilingual students to honor their linguistic backgrounds. Perhaps you might have students complete a low-stakes assignment or in-class activity that would welcome them to draw from their complex linguistic repertoires.

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Internet Access and Privacy Issues

Not all Duke students enrolled in virtual courses will have access to stable or speedy internet service. Accessing online materials might take a substantial amount of time and it might not be possible for students to successfully upload or download a large file. Maintaining a stable connection to quickly access and complete an online activity (e.g., a timed assessment) might not be possible. Zoom video streaming might be unstable.

Consider not requiring students who remotely attend class to keep their video continually turned on. They might not have sufficient internet bandwidth to successfully do so. They might be concerned about sharing their surroundings or invading the privacy of others in their home. While many students might use a virtual background to maintain privacy, not all laptops or other devices support that feature.

Provide materials for your students in virtual courses on Sakai or such when feasible rather than assuming they will be able to access other websites. Countries around the world block access to certain websites, platforms, and news outlets. This Inside Higher Ed article highlights the access issues that students in China might face, including with Google, Moodle, and YouTube. Information on internet censorship and restrictions around the globe is shared on this site.

Time Zone Issues with Virtual Courses

Consider that some students might not see your newly posted announcement or deadline until much later than others. In distant time zones, your post might first appear in the middle of the night. Share course announcements, assignments, and deadlines well in advance and allow some flexibility with timing. Students might live in an area with clocks set 13 or more hours ahead of North Carolina time.

When assigning pair or group work that will be completed outside of class, attempt to offer students the option of working with peers whose time zones are nearer their own.

Remind students well in advance of when U.S. clocks change during the spring and fall semesters. Their countries might not shift time in this way or might shift on other dates. Consider sharing a link to a world clock.

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