Practical Thoughts Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment

By Claudia J. Hernández Romero

Introduction

To create an inclusive classroom environment that allows for difference of opinion as well as various forms of identity expression throughout the semester/quarter instructors must set the tone along with ground rules from the very start and most importantly, in collaboration with the students enrolled. Currently, many people on both sides of the political party spectrum have expressed anxiety about stating their positions on hot topics as well as their personal experiences dealing with the travel ban that profiled Muslims and the immigration crack downs that threatened some of our very own students’ sense of security. In turn, college bound conservative youth feel that in liberal colleges they have to keep their opinions secret and liberals fear that conservative students will dismiss their ideas with aggression. Those of us in higher education are therefore called to consider best practices in the classroom that are both respectful of the diversity reflected in our student body—gender, race, sexuality, religion, etc.—as well as the values each person carries with them even if it is different than our own. Our job in higher education, and particularly in the liberal arts and sciences, is to teach students how to investigate issues through library research and fieldwork (i.e., first account interviews and observations) and to use their findings to formulate clear arguments to support their ideas. At Otis College of Art & Design, we are particularly tasked to prepare students to enter the work force and create materials
as well as work in collaboration with others and teaching them how to make sense of social issues and articulate their thoughts is a central part of the practice; art is not created in a bubble. If we can establish an inclusive classroom environment that motivates student participation and discussion of ideas, we can undermine misconceptions about others and the higher education setting and we can better prepare them for making work—whether as individuals or as part of a group—that is rooted in understanding of the social surrounding and political climate.

This report documents my efforts to improve inclusivity in my Liberal Arts & Sciences courses. I discuss reasons why I focused on developing an inclusive classroom environment as well as the methods I engaged in to determine practical ways to improve my pedagogy in this respect. I conclude with a discussion of the steps I took to create what I call the co-created classroom environment statement and discuss results of the voluntary assessment. The course I used as learning lab was my Ways of Knowing (WOK) course. I felt that the WOK theme of diversity and my particular focus on performance of identity would serve as the perfect setting for exploring inclusive teaching pedagogies.

**But First, Self-Reflection**

An inclusive classroom environment refers to a setting that intentionally considers pedagogical approaches to address the needs of the diverse student body that reflect variation in race, ethnic, gender, sexuality and religious forms of identification as well as learning abilities. Inclusiveness in the classroom depends “upon the kinds of interactions that occur between and among you and the students
in the classroom” (Saunders & Kardla 1997). A well-planned setting is influenced by course content, the instructors’ self-awareness of personal biases and even shortcomings or discomforts in respect to dealing with hot topics, the ways each class is planned and the ability of professors to respond to micro-aggressions in the class during discussions.

The literature on inclusivity in the classroom abounds with lists of what to consider and helpful articles with brief discussions of things we can do to improve our practice of inclusion, but examples are lacking. Thus, I applied for an OARS Diversity Grant to explore what I do in the classroom, to see what works and to determine areas where I can improve. My area of focus was inclusive teaching. Originally, I envisioned delving into methods for getting shy students to speak, for creating opportunities for everyone to discuss their points of view on hot topic and also assessing how my approaches worked for my students. However, what I ended up doing was working on the ways the classroom environment was set up from the start. As I read materials on best practices I noticed the holes is my approach at the start of classes and realized that while I am comfortable having difficult discussion I am not necessarily setting up the kind of environment that will encourage participation.

Upon self-reflection of how I start my classes, I noticed that I have not always introduced my pronouns or made a statement inviting students to do so whether at the time or in private. Moreover, I have employed the old “lets make a circle and say who we are, our major and/or something funny or interesting about yourself.” There is nothing wrong with gathering in a circle, of course, and it can indeed be a
useful icebreaker, but to create a space where students can feel safe in expressing their views regardless of political lines, I felt I needed to create opportunities for them to get to know each other in a more genuine way. With this in mind, I selected what I refer to as Get-to-Know-You games that would serve both students and myself in learning more about each other while also enabling all of us to build rapport with one another. This approach was inspired by Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Innovation which advises professors to find ways to ‘connect with students’ before even discussing the syllabus, but which I think can create optimal conditions for discussing difficult issues in class (Center for Teaching Innovation).

A second point of concern that emerged from my self-reflection was the need to establish ground rules to hold students and myself accountable for what we said as well as how we behaved. Up until this point I practiced making verbal statements that asked students to be mindful of what they said and/or to consider making comments to forward conversations rather than undermine difference of opinion, but I had not asked students to weigh in on listing ground rules they wanted to include and why. According to Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Innovation, “establishing ground rules, or a code of conduct, for the classroom helps foster community by balancing the learning needs of the individual with the learning needs of the group” (Center for Teaching Innovation). Their recommendations include facilitation of conversations around ground rules with students, to collect their thoughts and to include their rules in the syllabus. These recommendations
provided the framework for the Co-created Learning Environment Statement my students and I came up with and which I discuss in the section that follows.

**Inclusivity Begins on Day One**

To determine an inclusive classroom, one must start from Day One. For me, it began with introducing myself; I told students where I studied and my qualifications for teaching the WOK class on performance of identity. I asked them to call me Professor Hernández Romero, stated my gender pronouns and when I took attendance I asked students to correct me if I mispronounced their names and I made pronunciation notes next to their names if necessary. As trivial, and in some ways unnatural—I’m still getting used to stating my gender pronouns—as it might feel to focus so much on the introductions part of the class, it is a vital practice in setting both a welcoming tone as well as showing your openness and willingness to include all forms of diversity. Additionally, I shared with the class that I received an OARS grant to study diversity in the classroom and that our WOK class would serve as my learning lab. I told them what I planned to do, invited questions and also gave them the option to opt out of participation. Fortunately, no one opted out.

The second step I undertook to set the tone was to ask students to play “Find Someone Who . . .” Bingo (see Appendix). I found this game in an online site featuring icebreakers and while it is meant as a mere form of engaging in introductions in a fun way, I adopted it as a first step in creating opportunities to get to know one another and communicated this to the class. The game is simple, you pass out pre-printed copies of the Bingo card, which can be in the form of an 8 x 10
sheet of paper, and you ask students to get out of their seats and meet each other and fill their cards with their new friends’ names. I did not offer a prize to the first person to fill their card though I might in the future just to make the activity all the more fun.

The “Find Someone Who . . .” Bingo really got students giggling and smiling and it seemed to work in getting them to relax while at the same time meeting someone new. I played the game too and I could tell some students felt shy asking me questions on their Bingo card, but when they learned I was afraid of little birds they laughed and seemed to feel more relaxed asking me other questions on the card or simply talking with me a while. I found this activity useful in remembering their names by attaching the stories they shared with me during the game to their name and face.

The results of this exercise amazed me. It showed me that students overall care very much to support each other, but they also have expectations for all to participate in some form. During our discussion of ways to cultivate mutual respect during in-class discussions, several students encouraged shy cohorts—without singling anyone else, of course—to “come out of their shell” while at the same time assuring them that “we created class goals to honor and respect each other and that includes you” (see Appendix).

On Day Two I facilitated a 3-part, in-class activity to collaboratively create an inclusive classroom by establishing ground rules. This activity asked students to take the first minutes of class to write about the kind of learning environments they considered the most productive. After 10 minutes of self-reflection and writing I
asked students to make groups of four—I did not assign the groups, but I did invite them to sit with people they were getting to know for the first time. Once in groups I gave them 10 minutes to share their written responses with one another. Then I asked them to take 5 minutes to identify recurring key words or themes that came up between them. Next, I asked each group to share their key word or theme with the class while I wrote it down on the dry-erase board.

Every group cited respect as the most important quality of a favorable learning environment so from there I asked them to share ideas on a) ways to cultivate mutual respect during in-class discussions, b) what strategies we could use to deal with topics that trigger our emotional balance, and c) what they expected of me during discussions. This last part of the activity took longer to complete than I intended. I originally planned to spend 15 minutes on it, but it turned into 25 minutes for a total of 40 minutes spend on the activity. Nevertheless, the exercise was appreciated by students, some of whom stopped to talk to me at the end of class to tell me they liked the exercise or to let me know they had a learning difference and that they felt good having a professor who would take time to create a platform for inclusion.

Inclusive classrooms encourage and should make space for questions and feedback regarding all aspects of the course. CTI encourages mid-semester check-in’s that can be verbal or in the form of questionnaires. Mid-point check-in’s are useful in determining what learning methods work as well as which concepts require more discussion. While it made sense for me to do this with my students, I did not do a questionnaire-type of assessment. The mid-point check-in for the WOK
classes took priority therefore I conducted a verbal, in-class discussion that asked students to share their thoughts on the course thus far. The more vocal students spoke up with favorable responses, but the majority stayed quiet therefore I passed out strips of 3 X 5 pieces of recycled paper and asked students to write down any thoughts or questions on it and to leave it on my desk, face down, on the way out. No one took me up on this and I continued class without making changes. I did include a question in the end of class Diversity Evaluation that asked feedback regarding the midpoint check-in and I was not surprised to learn that most students did not recall doing it. This will certainly be an area I will have to improve upon in my future courses.

**Make Evaluation Part of the Practice**

Because evaluations are useful tools for improving the course and classroom environment I did offer an end of class Diversity Evaluation. Of the 16 students enrolled in my class, only 8 completed the Google questionnaire. As disappointing as these numbers were I was pleased to receive feedback from some of the quieter students. My questionnaire asked yes or no questions as well as open-ended questions that invited written responses. My focus centered on determining whether students felt comfortable speaking and engaging with cohorts and with myself in class and especially on assessing the value of the co-created statement for a diverse and inclusive learning environment.

The first set of questions asked students to reflect on their comfort levels during class and of the 8 respondents, 4 felt mostly comfortable on a scale from 1 to
5 with 5 being the most comfortable. Interestingly, the students seemed to find my in-class inclusivity strategies helpful in making them feel comfortable with cohorts when in small groups (fig. 1).

![Figure 1. Strategies Influence Sharing in Small Groups. Diversity Questionnaire. 2018](image)

To determine specific thoughts students might have about the ways the co-created exercise contributed to their comfort level, I asked a short answer question: “How did having the co-created classroom environment statement influence your contribution during discussions?” The responses I received were mostly vague with one student saying, “we had say in the rules” and another saying “there were close discussions;” I was unsure how to interpret these. One student did not seem to find the exercise useful at all and said, “I wasn't able to talk much.” Two students responded favorably. One student expressed, “I felt that I could be a different voice and perspective to everyone around me and help them expand their viewpoints a
little farther, or at least take into consideration the differences in thought process.”

However, the second student felt the exercise was “a good idea,” but also noted that it did not make a difference in their level of participation simply because “I don’t feel comfortable sharing my thoughts in front of people.

In regards to discussing their expectations of me for our co-created classroom environment statement, 3 students said they felt comfortable telling me what they expected and 3 said they were not. One person seemed to feel comfortable, not because of anything I did, but because they recognized the importance of cooperating with their teachers, but another felt comfortable because they considered me “open-minded.” Open-mindedness seems positive, but one student found that to be a fault, they said, “no, she was always so willing to let us speak and never forced anyone to do anything they didn’t want to.” This comment seems to connect directly to my policy of letting students “pass” on making comments if they do not feel comfortable. I think I might have focused too much on making students feel comfortable and in turn did not create enough opportunities to encourage people to step out of their comfort zones. I will have to consider activities that ask students to pick a side or position in order to create balance between comfort and encouragement.

Regretfully, I did not ask students to comment on a particular strategy of inclusion. It would have been useful to see what activity worked best and to ask students to weigh in on the Find someone who … Bingo exercise, specifically. Nevertheless, when viewed as a whole, students seemed to feel that overall, the use of activities proved helpful in making them feels comfortable. I asked, “did the
professor’s strategies for inclusion help you feel comfortable about sharing your thoughts out loud during the class? Yes or no? If no, what could she have done that would have made you feel more comfortable?” and four students said yes. One student observed, “yes because some people were opening up” while another felt that I would not “judge or anything but wanted to share.” One student thought I created a comfortable space, but that I also did not engage with those who disagreed with me. This critique is hard to take because I consider myself an effective conversant, I imagine myself to ask questions that make space for all views, but like anyone else I do have my own biases. I will have to pay closer attention to ways I facilitate discussions and what I share my personal views in order to ensure that I don’t inadvertently make anyone feel excluded from the conversation.

**Concluding Thoughts**

While I personally found the experience of setting up a comfortable learning environment from the start the students appeared to have mixed feelings about the way things worked. They liked the activities and found them helpful in cultivating an inclusive classroom environment, but they did not necessarily find it to be the kind of space that encourages everyone to speak during discussion. Despite the shortcomings of my research on inclusive pedagogies in the classroom, I will continue to focus on the ways I start my class and how I set up an inclusive environment. I think there is great promise to using making Day 1 a time to get to know students; they did feel that I made an effort to get to know them and at least one person cited the Day 1 game as the tool that helped me remember things about
them (fig 2). Students also found this practice useful and some noted that it might be good to do in other classes as well (fig 3).

Figure 2. She remembered us by what we did. Diversity Evaluation. 2018

Figure 3. Ground rules are good for all classes. Diversity Evaluation. 2018

What I have to work on is using activities that allow them to feel uncomfortable and which push them to step a bit out of their comfort zones. Some of my colleagues do
this with success already; Marsha Hopkins employs an in-class debate exercise that creates tension in a safe way for students to deal with hot topics. While I did not discuss self-education as part of the practice of inclusivity, it should be understood as a guiding principle for undertaking this research. I’d like to add that part of my practice this semester also included talking with colleagues within Liberal Arts & Sciences Department as well as Studio faculty. It helps to establish friendships that allow us to express some of the uncomfortable issues that come up in class, but also to make space for needed dialogue that is helping me to determine best practices for addressing the needs of art & design students. And so, the work shall continue.
Appendix

Week 2 Lesson Plan
1. Attendance

2. Creating An Inclusive Classroom: Step 2: Co-design the Learning Environment by establishing ground rules

Part 1: In class writing prompt: Which learning environments do you find to be the most productive? Which learning environments have you experienced that were not productive? Describe what you consider to be 'productive'

A Learning Environment is characterized as:

a. The physical space where the teaching and learning take place.
b. The culture of a school or classroom

• The culture is shaped by the ethos or spirit and character that are emphasized. It includes how people interact and treat each other as well as how teachers organize the educational setting physically, but also conceptually. What goals does the instructor communicate and how, what activities are used to convey ideas and what assessment strategies are used to check-in with students.

Part 2: Discuss in groups
Students can be in groups of three or four; they will share their responses and one person will make a list of the common themes.

Part 3: Class discussion
Refer to the themes to determine the kind of classroom atmosphere we want to have. Additionally, consider any thoughts on how we will make space for the other two classes of students and bring them into our learning environment in ways that will be constructive and productive for all of us. Questions to consider:
What expectations do you have of me as Professor? What expectations do you have of yourself and of others? What expectations should I have of you? How can we support each other in the learning environment especially when dealing with difficult topics that concern race, gender, religiosity/spirituality and nationalism or 'place identity'?
Co-created Statement for a Diverse & Inclusive Learning Environment

1. Of all of the goals and values discussed in class, we singled out mutual respect as the central most important quality of a favorable learning environment. Below are the points we agreed were necessary for cultivating mutual respect during our in-class discussions:

- Approach things with an open mind and be open to new ideas even if it means a change in your opinion
  - Consider: Will a new idea change me for the better? Does a new idea increase my ability to hold a conversation about a given topic?

- Don’t interrupt others when they are speaking
  - Strategies to consider: a) hold your thoughts and practice taking a deep breath and simply listen or b) write down the comment you want to make or the question you want to ask

- Do not make fun of others’ answers; remember that it takes courage to express thoughts on sensitive topics especially those that deal with identity markers such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality

- “Don’t assume what someone is going to say before they say it”

- Do not discredit another’s point of view
  - Remember that we all have different worldviews and that communication cannot occur if we are not willing to see outside of our own perspective to try and understand another.
    - Recognize that we can all be ethnocentric that is to believe that our perspective is central and right; it is a sense of cultural superiority, and you should consider if it is what you intend to communicate or not.
    - To make space for a different viewpoint does not mean you have to adopt it or agree with it and it also means that if something expressed is unethical that we have to accept it.

- “Allow explanations before commencing critiques

- “Know that another’s “opinion can’t be wrong”
  - Opinions are strongly held and many people are reluctant to see them as wrong. Can we hold respect for the person stating their opinion and instead offer comments to create conversation with them? Can we work on comparing resources in order to increase our informed knowledge of the topic?
2. Sometimes topics strike personal cords; if that happens in our class we have agreed to practice strategies of a) self care and b) consideration for classmates and c) commitment to maintaining a safe and respectful learning environment. Below is a list of strategies we will honor:

- “Think for a quick second”
- Inform your peers that you are processing information; attempting to make it logical and coherent
  - Use terms such as “at the moment, I think or I feel…”
- Identify your own feelings and feel free to ask for a break or to step outside for a few breaths if you need it
- When in groups, choose to a) create time limits for speaking, or b) students should be proactive participants in sharing or asking questions
  - If you are shy or unable to express yourself in the moment, ask to pass, but try to come out of your shell sometimes and remember that we created class goals to honor and respect each other and that includes you.
- Be aware of each other, notice if there is a shy person or if someone is emotional... ask them kindly to contribute
  - You can practice Prof Hernandez Romero’s “drop it down” method and go around your circle a) sharing a thought and b) commenting on at least one thing another person said.

3. As facilitators of in-class discussions professors are expected to assist in maintaining a safe and fruitful classroom environment. Below are the ways we determined that I can be of better service to the whole in this respect:

- Prof. stays open to feedback & students actively participate in providing it
- Professor can ask the class, rather than a particular student (in order to avoid singling them out) do you need a moment? This gives space to go outside and release some emotions
- Take short breaks between discussions; be mindful of the time and the mood in the room
- Take class to learn outside sometimes and/or rearrange class room setting
- Offer more discussion and activities & less lecture
- Don’t let the more outspoken or emotional person take the lead; help facilitate discussion from other sides; mediate
  - Use different activities to make space for all voices in the classroom
### Find Someone Who . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can whistle</th>
<th>Has broken a bone before</th>
<th>Has an unusual fear (e.g., chicks and small birds, worms, milk, etc)</th>
<th>Has travelled to a different country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Speaks a different language</td>
<td>Loves cooking</td>
<td>Has served in the military</td>
<td>Plays an instrument</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorite food is hamburger and fries</td>
<td>Has over 1,000 followers on Instagram</td>
<td>Is left-handed</td>
<td>Can skateboard</td>
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<td>Goes camping</td>
<td>Has not travelled outside the U.S before</td>
<td>Has eaten century egg</td>
<td>Is not on Facebook</td>
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Bibliography

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