Teaching Excellence

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

Vol. 11, No. 4, 1999-2000

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Terrie Nolinske, Lincoln Park Zoo & Consultants in Professional Development

The world of higher education is very different from what it was just two or three decades ago. One might look back on the history of higher education and realize that there was a pattern of exclusivity rather than inclusivity. That, however, has changed dramatically as educational opportunities have increased significantly in just the past decade. As faculty, we have the opportunity as well as the social obligation to nurture talents and gifts that once might have been lost. We all have this opportunity — regardless of the teaching and learning setting in which we find ourselves. In response, it is our individual ethical and professional responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment — to the best of our ability.

Our Students' Differences

Each student brings into the learning environment attitudes, behaviors, and experiences that are different, yet similar. Differences among students may or may not be obvious. Among differences we might list are creativity, physical or psychological (dis)ability, educational background, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, class (Warren, 1998), life experiences, language, culture, gender, ability to problem solve or use technology, race, age, military experience, leisure interests, religion, marital and parental status, teaching or learning style, and academic discipline.

These and other differences have the potential to contribute added value to learning rather than disappear into a melting pot. With a heightened awareness of differences and diversity issues, students and faculty may be more sensitive to and accepting of another's point of view, especially if different from their own.

By modeling inclusive attitudes and behaviors, faculty and teaching assistants help students learn and apply strategies for acknowledging differences and respecting diversity. Consequently, students shape inclusive behaviors and attitudes in each other. We model such behaviors by the practices we incorporate into our teaching.

Strategies for Inclusion

Rules of the day. Adopting rules of the day (or class term) creates a sense of student-faculty ownership and fosters individual responsibility. Rules of the day might include the following: 1) be prompt/regular in attendance; 2) listen to what is said and *how* it is said; 3) participate actively; 4) confine discussion to the topic; 5) verbalize one's own views, using "I" instead of "we/they"; 6) respect others' views; 7) avoid blame and attack; 8) give and receive feedback graciously; and 9) honor confidentiality, sharing *what* was said, not who said it.

Be a change agent. A change agent is someone who takes action when appropriate and addresses inappropriate behavior when important. Faculty can facilitate behavioral and attitudinal shifts by asking themselves and their students, "What am I thinking/feeling? Are (*my*) biases getting in the way? What do I need from others in order to be able to work together better?"

Change agents address issues. They describe facts, feelings, and perceptions clearly. They demonstrate empathy and seek to clarify, asking "When we say _____, what are we *really* saying?" Change agents listen and ask such questions as, "What is your perception of the situation? What led you to that view? What do we (dis)agree on? What is getting in the way?" Change agents do not judge. They give specific examples of undesirable behavior followed by "how it makes (me) feel ... because .... Therefore, (I) would prefer that...". Change agents acknowledge and respect differences.

Classroom management. In class, students should be encouraged to think about material and engage in active discussion so that misconceptions are cleared up in a timely way. Teaching students to organize, apply, synthesize and evaluate information helps them filter that information and identify core concepts.

For example, no matter what our discipline may be, we can develop cases which demonstrate people, despite their differences, sharing certain values. We can encourage students to share stories and situations in which they perceived discrimination and stereotyping. In doing so, however, we must recognize that differences, of whatever type, should not be highlighted unless relevant to the topic at hand. Not expecting students to function as experts or spokespersons representing any particular group is also sound practice.

If students have a (dis)ability, take cues from them or ask them what you can do to include them effectively. Listen to how they refer to their (dis)ability. Focus on their needs and interests, as with anyone else. Find out the degree to which they can see, hear, or use a physically disabled limb. Meet with the student(s) to find out how s/he takes notes, offering to do whatever will give them necessary information. Do they need more time for tests? What is problematic for them in class or getting to/from? How can activities be modified for effective class participation and inclusion? (See Scott, 1997.)

(Continued on back)

When facilitating classroom discussions and judgment or criticism is necessary, choose a tone and choice of words that shows respect for those who hold different beliefs and opinions. Adopt multiple teaching strategies and methods that stimulate the senses (e.g., vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch); and address some, if not all, of Gardner's multiple intelligences (e.g., logical-mathematical, spatial, musical). Faculty should encourage students to make connections between current course material, other courses, and life experiences. This makes the theoretical and abstract applied, concrete, and relevant. Offering students more time in which to take an exam, alternative testing formats, or a menu plan mixing assignments and exams can go far in alleviating student anxiety and fostering an inclusive learning environment. Referring students, as appropriate, to academic advisors, library services, tutors, computer labs, or other student services is another way in which faculty can support student development and acknowledge differences.

Think outside the box. Edward de Bono, authority on teaching thinking as a skill, separates thinking into six distinct modes or hats and assigns each hat a color. A white hat represents pure facts and figures, neutral and objective, while a red hat holds strong emotion, hunches, and intuition — "this is how I feel". Black hats point out what is wrong and why it will not work although not in an argumentative way while yellow hats are optimistic, positive, probing for value/benefit, and permitting logic and dreams. Green hats are creative thinkers and fertile problem solvers, asking "what happens next?". Blue hats define problems, shape questions, summarize, and assume control like an orchestra conductor.

When discussing sensitive issues, the following exercise, based on the concept of *Six Thinking Hats*, may be of interest to faculty and students to encourage different thinking or thinking about differences, to infuse energy into a discussion, to depersonalize feedback, or to ensure representation of multiple viewpoints. The activity can be done at any time during a class or a meeting. Materials needed include a container for the flash cards and stacks of colored flash cards (white, red, black, yellow, green, and blue). Type on each card a concept summary of what that color represents. Each color should be represented proportionately to the number of students. It is very helpful to give participants a description of the activity and a summary of concepts represented by each color so they might review them in advance of the activity.

To start, shuffle the flash cards, and pass them around until everyone has one. The facilitator of learning then makes a statement or asks a provocative question to promote discussion. Participants contribute to the discussion based on the "point of view" of their color. Depending on the topic, each group of colors may be allowed to meet at the beginning of class to plan an approach to the discussion. Once underway, white hat thinkers usually describe the situation as it is, greens offer alternatives, yellows extol the benefits while black hats note pitfalls and reds share their hunches and feelings. Blues shape and direct the process. Once people are familiar with the technique, they enjoy "changing colors" at designated points in the discussion.

Summary

Perception is an individual's view of reality. Students enter the learning environment with different sets of perceptions, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Once we accept that different does not mean *less than*, it is easier to respect those differences and effectively use them to make connections in the promotion of an inclusive learning environment. We now have the opportunity to do so in ways not previously practiced in higher education with intent and planning,

The promotion of such an environment is the duty of every reflective and responsible teacher.

References / Resources

DeBono, E. (1985). *Six thinking hats.* Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences.* New York: BasicBooks.

Gismar, K., & Nicoleau, G. (1993). Teaching for change: Addressing issues of difference in the college classroom. Cambridge, MA: *Harvard Educational Review.*

Scott, S. S. (1997). Accommodating college students with learning disabilities: How much is enough? *Innovative Higher Education*, 22, 85-100.

Warren, L. (1998). Class in the classroom. *Essays on Teaching Excellence.* The POD Network.

Terrie Nolinske (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is Associate Director of Education at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and President, Consultants in Professional Development in Oak Park, Illinois.

POD NETWORK

A Publication of The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

Editor: *Kay Herr Gillespie*
CKF Associates
2900 Tulane Drive
Fort Collins CO
kaygi2@aol.com

Subscriptions: Member, $80, or non-member $100 annually (campus-wide reproduction rights); Individual, $10 annually. *Teaching Excellence* is published eight times annually. To order, send check or P.O. to POD Network at the address below or call (912) 293-6178 for further information.

The POD Network facilitates the exchange of information and ideas, the development of professional skills, the exploration and debate of educational issues, and the sharing of expertise and resources. For further information, contact:

David Graf
Manager, Administrative Services
POD Network
Valdosta State University
Valdosta, GA 31698-0840
912-293-6168
podnet@valdosta.edu