Practical strategies: Designing culturally inclusive environments

Staff and students at Curtin have a variety of ideas about what constitutes good teaching and learning. These ideas are influenced by their own culture and life experiences. For many students and staff, the educational environment at Curtin could be a new and possibly challenging experience. Much of what we do in education is actually framed by cultural ‘rules’ that are often tacit. This includes the ways we teach and learn, the curriculum intent, design and content, and our attitudes and values about schooling and education.

Culture is the basis of what people ‘take for granted’ or what they notice about others but is largely invisible to themselves. The invisibility of culture in educational settings can have unintended consequences. Despite the best intentions, teachers and students might be unaware that what they say, do or teach in the classroom could seem strange or offensive to others. Sometimes doing what seems ‘normal’ unintentionally excluding others from participating fully.

Thinking about culture

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and others’ is noticing what you find surprising, or perhaps offensive, about differences in everyday behaviour between someone from a different cultural group and yourself. When this happens think about what cultural ‘rules’ the other person and you might be using (Carroll, 2000). Expectations about roles, responsibilities and relationships of teachers and student can vary.

Questions to guide reflection

What can I say about myself and my own culture?

- What national, ethnic or religious group(s) do I belong to? How does my teaching reflect this?
- What seems normal or strange to me? What sort of student/staff behaviour am I most familiar or comfortable with? What surprises or challenges me?
- What experiences do I have as a result of studying/working in different cultures and how can I use this?

What do I know about my student and staff colleagues?

- What do I know about the cultural and education systems of my students and staff colleagues?
- How current/accurate is my information?
- What do I know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history?

Strategies and tips for designing a culturally inclusive teaching and learning environment

Introductions

- Set up an introduction system so that all students can get to know something about you, their class colleagues and the diversity of experience in the class.

Establish appropriate modes of address

- If you interact one on one with students, ask what form of address they prefer.
- Use inclusive language that does not assume Western name forms:
  - ‘family’ name, not ‘last’ name
  - ‘given’ name, not ‘Christian’ name.
- Students from more formal educational cultures, where status differences related to age or educations qualifications are important, might be uncomfortable in addressing teaching staff by their given names. A compromise can be for students to use your title and given name, e.g. ‘Professor Marie,’ ‘Dr Ivan’.
- If in doubt, ask.

Make the class a safe place for all students

- Establish a classroom in which teachers and students demonstrate mutual respect.
- Manage behaviour that might stimulate ‘classroom incivilities’.
  - Teacher incivility can include:
    - Prejudice and
    - Neglecting the needs of individual students or groups of students.
  - Student incivility can manifest as:
    - Poor punctuality
    - Lack of preparation for or non-participation in classes
    - Disruption of classes
    - Distraction of teacher and fellow students, and cheating.
Establish inclusive class ground rules that safeguard against racism and harassment.

- In small classes, guide students to negotiate their own code of conduct.
- In larger classes, provide a framework and ask for student feedback and ratification of ground rules.
- Define how class members discuss issues, especially potentially sensitive issues. For example, people must have valid support/evidence for what they say.
- Consider the impacts, both personal and academic, of the classroom environment on student identity. For example, be mindful that you may have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in your class, though for historical or personal reasons they may not necessarily have identified as such.

For more about ground rules and strategies, see Practical strategies: Inclusive practices for managing controversial issues.


Treat diversity positively

- Avoid over generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative), e.g. ‘All Asian students are quiet in class’.
- Do not expect any individual student to speak as a representative of his/her culture.
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource.
- Plan opportunities for all students to contribute input related to their own culture (but avoid making any student a cultural representative).

For further information see General Information: Culturally inclusive practice in the teaching environment.

Establish clear expectations in the classroom

- Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work.
- Check that your students understand the Australian university context and what is expected of them.
- Clarify the format and purpose of the particular session type you are teaching and the type of student participation expected.
- Explain the written topic outlines, objectives and outcomes that are provided to students, checking that everyone understands.
- Teach appropriate citing, referencing and how to avoid plagiarism in papers. Provide relevant information such as the Referencing guide developed by the Curtin Library.
- Make your marking scheme clear. Let students know if the emphasis is on communicating information and ideas or language accuracy. Sometimes students can be anxious about being penalised for poor English expression.

See the table on the following page, Reviewing your approach to teaching.

 Appreciate the challenges and adjustment process

- Recognise that while you may be knowledgeable on matters in your own culture and discipline, it is both respectful and recommended that you take the time to listen, learn and reflect on the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures - the First Peoples of Australia. For more information on this visit Working Together: Intercultural leadership and Indigenous culture, protocols and terms.
- When people live and work in a new culture, they may experience ‘culture shock.’ This is characterised by a series of phases influencing how people perceive and respond to others and events around them. For further information, see General Information: Understanding and supporting people experiencing culture shock.
- Recognise that people for whom English is a second language or subsequent language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture.
- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to ‘talk down’ or to talk simplistically to international students or local speakers of other languages if English is not their first language.
## Reviewing your approach to teaching

| **Teacher role** | The teacher's role is to guide students toward independent learning, by encouraging self-directed learning and peer teaching and learning. | **Your comments** | The role of the teacher is to provide disciplinary expertise and to cover all the skills and knowledge that students are required to learn. |
| **Student role** | Students are expected to develop expertise in the accepted disciplinary knowledge via the teacher’s explanations and demonstrations. | **Your comments** | Students are expected to develop their own ideas by questioning and critiquing what teachers present in class. |
| **Academic role** | Good academic behaviour includes quoting recommended texts in order to demonstrate learning. | **Your comments** | Good academic behaviour includes understanding competing explanations for differing phenomena and formulating a theoretically defensible rationale for one’s own opinion. |
| **Tone of classroom interaction** | Classroom interaction should be informal, where teachers and students converse on a first name basis as colleagues in the higher education environment. | **Your comments** | A degree of formality in class is important because students need to trust and respect teachers as they are the experts who will ultimately assess and grade student work. |
| **The curriculum** | The curriculum is for an Australian university and therefore the content must be essentially Australian. | **Your comments** | The curriculum is for a global environment and market and therefore care should be taken to ensure that the content, illustrative examples, theorists and readings reflect diverse world views. |