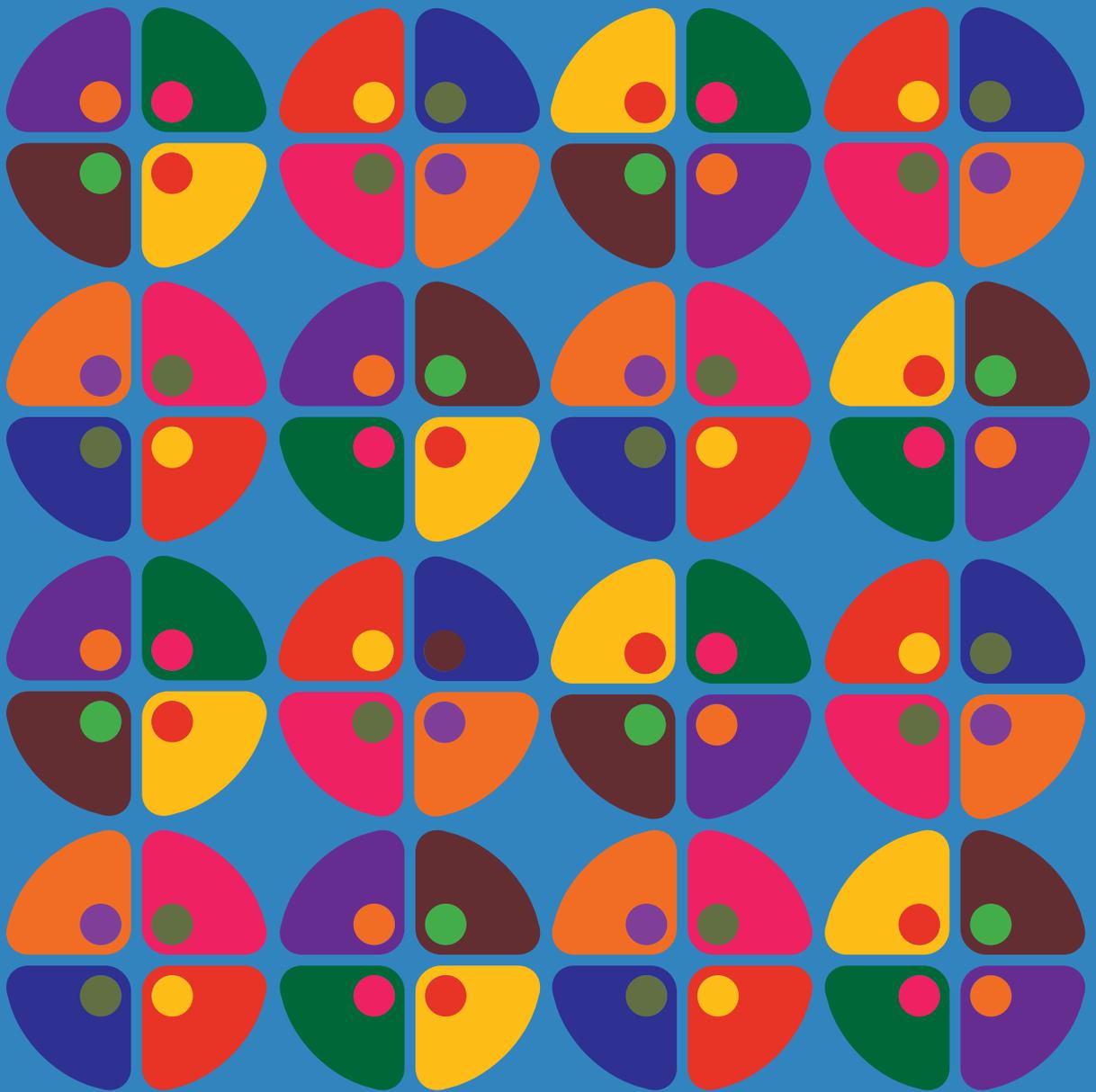
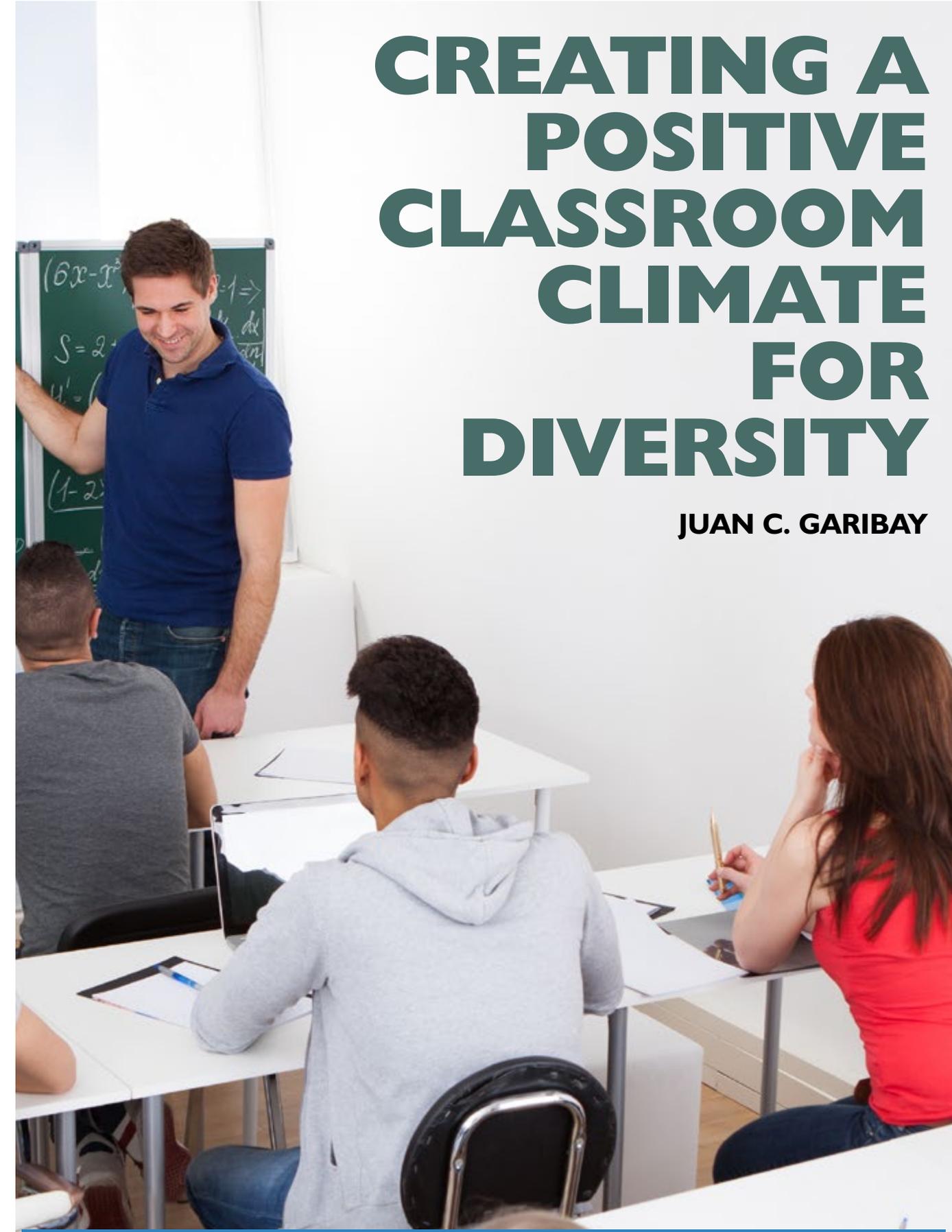


# CREATING A POSITIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE FOR DIVERSITY



**UCLA** Diversity & Faculty Development



# CREATING A POSITIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE FOR DIVERSITY

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# *It is the responsibility of faculty members to treat every student as an individual and to focus on the learning success of each student in a class.*

## **WHY THE CLASSROOM CLIMATE IS IMPORTANT FOR LEARNING**

**T**HE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT in a class can affect student engagement and performance. Whether the class is in a large lecture hall, a small seminar, or a laboratory section, a learning environment where all feel safe, valued, and respected is necessary for students to achieve and demonstrate their full potential. Since a negative environment can be an obstacle to learning, it is essential to understand how to create and sustain a positive climate for all students. Elements of the learning environment that need to be addressed include the physical—providing adequate materials or reducing noise—to the psychosocial—how students feel and are treated in the classroom. In order for a classroom to have an inclusive climate for diversity, students must feel supported in the components of the course, including content, discussion, physical/structural aspects, and class meeting times.

Although all participants (students, teaching assistants, and instructors) in a course play a part, the faculty member's role is central in the formation of the climate for diversity. Faculty have the power to select course content, facilitate discussion, and reward learning—all of which can affect the classroom climate. In order to make sure that the climate is conducive to learning and to the success of all students, faculty should consider the elements that affect classroom climate when planning a course.

## **STUDENT DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM**

**S**TUDENTS bring their own multiple social group identities to the learning environment. These identities can include, but are not limited to, gender, race/ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, dis/ability, age, socioeconomic status, and religion.

The broader society has defined, ascribed meaning, and given status and power to these identities (Johnson, 2005; Omi and Winant, 1994; Tatum, 2000). Since they can shape the experiences of students within classrooms, it is critical for professors to understand these various social identities in order to actively develop inclusive learning environments for all students

## **CLASSROOM CLIMATES**

**A**STUDY by DeSurra and Church (1994) shows that a useful way to think about climate in the classroom is through two sets of oppositions along a continuum: marginalizing vs. centralizing and explicit vs. implicit. *Explicitly marginalizing* climates are hostile, unwelcoming, or discriminatory. Classrooms where instructors and/or students openly express demeaning attitudes about particular, especially marginalized, groups are considered explicitly marginalizing climates. *Implicitly marginalizing* climates exclude certain groups of people in more subtle and indirect ways. These climates can be more difficult to recognize, given that implicitly marginalizing climates can develop even when instructors or students are consciously attempting to be welcoming or encouraging. When instructors request that students not use race/ethnicity in a particular analysis or discussion, they send the message that racial/ethnic experiences are not valid in intellectual discussions. Or, an instructor may call on a student from a historically marginalized group to represent the perspectives of the entire group. In their study, DeSurra and Church found that implicitly marginalizing—rather than explicitly marginalizing—climates are most common in college classrooms.

On the other continuum are implicitly centralizing and explicitly centralizing climates. *Implicitly centralizing* climates are those where unplanned responses that validate alternative perspectives and

## ACKNOWLEDGING THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY

In order to encourage all students to achieve, instructors need to communicate the importance of diversity in the practice of all disciplines in the university. Acknowledging the value you place on diversity is essential to creating a positive classroom climate from the very beginning of the course. Including a statement in the syllabus is a good place to start, for example:

**Respect for Diversity:** I consider it part of my responsibility as instructor to address the learning needs of all of the students in this course. I will present materials that are respectful of diversity: race, color, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religious beliefs, political preference, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship, or national origin among other personal characteristics. I also believe that the diversity of student experiences and perspectives is essential to the deepening of knowledge in a course. Any suggestions that you have about other ways to include the value of diversity in this course are welcome.

In scheduling midterms and other exams, I have tried to avoid conflicts with major religious holidays. If there is a conflict with your religious observances, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to make arrangements.

Sources: College of Education Syllabus Checklist, University of Iowa, <http://www.education.uiowa.edu/dean/policies/syllabus>; Class Atmosphere, University of Minnesota, <http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/syllabus/expectations/atmosphere/index.html>; Diversity and Inclusion, Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Central Florida, <http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/TeachingAndLearningResources/CourseDesign/Syllabus/statements.php#diversity>

experiences occur. If, for example, a student takes a risk and raises a perspective from a historically marginalized group (not knowing how the contribution will be received), the instructor can build on the student's contribution in a productive and validating way. Such a result promotes learning for everyone. In *explicitly centralizing* classrooms, historically marginalized groups and perspectives are both validated in spontaneous discussions and are intentionally and overtly integrated into the content. These courses also often contain written ground rules for discussion and course policies to foster inclusivity and sensitivity to the experiences and perspectives of all students.

## CLIMATE IMPACTS LEARNING

**A**N EXTENSIVE BODY of research documents how various elements of the climate—formal and informal interactions, the numerical representation of individuals from diverse social identities, or individuals' perceptions of the environment—may impact student learning (Hurtado et al. 2012). While extensive and complex, this body of research generally shows that positive interactions with other groups, higher levels of compositional diversity on a campus, and positive perceptions of the campus climate are all positively associated with student learning, satisfaction, and success. Negative experiences with these same elements of the climate can have negative effects on student outcomes. Even though many of these studies focus on measures of the climate at an institutional level, these findings have important implications and applications for the classroom as well. Given that it represents the center of the educational experience for students and faculty, the classroom is a critical sphere where many aspects of the campus climate materialize.

Studies that have specifically focused on hostile classroom climates document marginalization on the basis of gender (Hall, 1982; Hall and Sandler, 1984; Pascarella et al., 1997; Sandler and Hall, 1986; Whitt et al., 1999), race and ethnicity (Hurtado et al., 1999; Watson et al., 2002), and sexual orientation (DeSurra and Church, 1994). Classroom climates that are hostile toward historically marginalized groups are not only less hospitable for those groups but also inhibit the motivation to learn and the cognitive

development of students (Ambrose et al., 2010; Hall and Sandler, 1984). Expressing or validating stereotypes is a powerful way that faculty can create negative learning experiences for students from historically marginalized groups.

Because stereotypes can inhibit learning and performance in the classroom, it is essential that faculty consider the messages they are sending and actively communicate respect and expectation of success for all students. Steele and Aronson's (1995) groundbreaking study on the influence of stereotypes shows that the sense of threat that arises in members of a stereotyped group can negatively affect their level of preparation, their self-confidence, and their performance on tasks regardless of their ability. This phenomenon is termed "stereotype threat." This threat can be triggered regardless of whether the activation of a stereotype is intentional or not. Operating through both cognitive and motivational mediating mechanisms, stereotypes generate emotions—such as anger and frustration—that limit the ability of an individual to think clearly and disrupt their cognitive processes (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat can also trigger coping mechanisms. To protect their self-concept against potentially legitimizing the stereotype of low performance, a student might, for example, disidentify with a chosen discipline (Major et al., 1998). A recent study by Chang et al. (2011) presents evidence that stereotype threat can influence the persistence of underrepresented racial minority students in the sciences.

Conversely, studies show that more positive classroom climates can have a positive relationship with student outcomes. Results from a study focused on the educational significance of racial and ethnic composition found that classrooms with medium levels of heterogeneity (where students from racial minority groups composed 33 to 38% of enrolled students) reveal positive effects on students' problem-solving abilities and group skills (Terenzini et al., 2001). Group discussions that include viewpoints from diverse students stimulate higher integrative complexity (Antonio et al., 2004). And, students who interact with diverse peers within the classroom (and informally) show the greatest engagement in active thinking (Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002). Further, a professor's diversity orientation—a factor that

includes the incorporation of readings on gender and racial issues in the curriculum—can positively impact student GPA (Astin 1993).

## PREPARING TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

**C**REATING a safe and inclusive classroom climate for diversity requires effort long before a course begins. Instructors should take steps during the planning of the course in order to help make a diverse set of students feel safe, valued, and respected. Below are several issues that should be considered in preparing to create an inclusive classroom environment for all students.

**Self-identification.** Start by thinking about your own identity and how your attitudes and experiences may affect your teaching and your students' responses. Consider your previous classroom experiences or incidences. These may give you insight into how your behavior impacts your effectiveness as a teacher. Consider your background and try to recall how you first became conscious of diversity and difference. Recognizing your own perspective is a step toward acknowledging the perspectives of students. Further, prepare yourself by considering how to respond if diversity becomes an issue in your class.

**Self-learning.** We all have more to learn from other groups. Informing yourself about other groups and cultures—whether through readings or other means—is critical to increasing awareness of student needs and of problematic assumptions about particular groups. Even if you think you may know about the experiences of historically marginalized groups, take the time to continue to learn. Offensive remarks or actions are often made by individuals who believe they are well intentioned. For example, a professor in a language class may think that asking a student who looks Asian how a phrase is said in Japanese is validating. The student—who may not be Japanese or may not speak it—may feel stigmatized. Instead, encouraging all students to share examples from languages they know would be more inclusive and perhaps lead to a better understanding of the diverse experiences that students bring to the classroom. Such increased understanding can help instructors



## EXAMINING YOUR CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

When thinking about your approach to teaching in the classroom and its effect on student learning, be introspective. Consider the messages you might be sending. Below are some questions to ask about your attitudes and classroom behavior. If you hear that students are concerned about your sensitivity to diversity issues, don't ignore the issue. Consult a colleague or the UCLA Office of Instructional Development.

- **Do you use inclusive language? It is important to use “she” as well as “he.” Or, try using singular “they.” When using anecdotes to illustrate points, avoid always using male protagonists.**
- **When lecturing, do you use phrases such as “It’s easy to see...” or “I’m sure the answer is obvious to all...”? Such phrases implicitly exclude students who may have not**

**understood and discourages them from asking questions. It’s important to give students the opportunity to ask questions without feeling stigmatized or self-conscious.**

- **Do you use outdated terms for social groups? It is important to be sensitive and use appropriate language for social groups.**
- **Do you make an effort to learn the names of your students and pronounce them correctly? Showing respect for your students will help them succeed in your class.**
- **Do you prepare yourself to address diversity issues in class discussions? Don’t assume that your discipline is immune.**
- **Do you treat your students equally? Do you make less eye contact with some students?**
- **Do you respond differently to white students or to women students? When you notice that a student is unprepared for class, do you respond differently depending on your perceptions of their social group? Do you find yourself assessing the attractiveness of students? Does their attractiveness affect your treatment of them?**
- **Do you allow students to interrupt each other?**
- **Do you give feedback that includes praise?**
- **Do you use group activities to foster student confidence?**

Sources: Teaching for Inclusion: Valuing the Diversity of Our Students, Southern Methodist University, <http://www.smu.edu/Provost/CTE/Resources/TeachCourse/TeachingSituations/Inclusion>; Diversity Issues for the Instructor: Identifying Your Own Attitudes, Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1998; Five Competencies for Culturally Competent Teaching and Learning, C. Irish and M. Scrubb, Faculty Focus, Higher Ed Teaching Strategies, Magna Publications, 2012, <http://www.faculty-focus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/five-competencies-for-culturally-competent-teaching-and-learning/>; Diversity Issues for the Instructor: Identifying Your Own Attitudes, [http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p3\\_2](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p3_2); Teaching In Racially Diverse College Classrooms, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/TFTrace.html>

more effectively bring the needs and concerns of those at the margins to the center. Learning about others may also help instructors draw on examples from various cultural reference points so that diverse students feel included and valued.

**Accommodations.** Students with disabilities may require academic accommodations—to have equal access in a course and to have an accurate measure of how they perform. In addition, particular religious holidays and practices may require that some students miss class certain days or receive other accommodations (not provided by the Office for Students with Disabilities). The class syllabus should recognize the need for such accommodations and provide information on how to submit them. Include statements such as “If you have a documented disability, please contact the Office for Students with Disabilities as soon as possible” and “If you have other requirements and wish to discuss non-disability related academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible.”

After a student registers with the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), a counselor will contact the professor to discuss recommendations for the appropriate academic accommodation(s). For some disability-related academic accommodations (such as note-taking), the OSD may not contact the professor, if the accommodation can be provided with minimal to no disruption to the class. OSD requests should be given full consideration by instructors and be handled as expeditiously as possible. The OSD welcomes dialog and is committed to working with faculty to ensure the best possible outcome for the student. It is important to be aware that materials for the course may need to be selected early so that students have time to address their learning needs before the quarter begins.

**Course Content.** When selecting course content, it is important to consider whether the perspectives and scholarship of diverse groups are being represented. Focusing solely on the experiences of one group or on a single perspective is likely to exclude diverse viewpoints. Such exclusion sends the message that only the experiences and scholarship of some groups are valued and may lead to particular students feeling marginalized. Depending on the topic and

focus of the course, instructors should include scholarship or materials developed by people of various backgrounds and/or perspectives.

It is also critical that the perspectives and experiences of various groups be represented in a comprehensive and respectful manner. Materials that address underrepresented groups’ experiences should not trivialize or disenfranchise these groups. Also, instructors should be cognizant of the portrayal of particular groups or cultures in course content and recognize the complexity of each group. When discussing issues of race, instructors should also acknowledge that there are many groups that are affected by racial issues and should avoid solely focusing on a black and white dichotomy. The perspectives of various groups regarding racial matters should be included in course materials. Instructors also have the responsibility to recognize the limitations of texts. If books with problematic limitations are ultimately used in the course, instructors should acknowledge these limitations early in the course to help students read the materials critically.

Within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, instructors can also make the curriculum more inclusive by including content about diversity, justice, and social responsibility. Many discipline-focused education journals—*Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *Journal of College Science Teaching*, *Journal of Engineering Education*, *Journal of Chemical Education*, and *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*—provide examples of teaching strategies

**The UCLA Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) has a guide for faculty (<http://www.osd.ucla.edu/Faculty-Guide>) on working with students with disabilities. It is meant to support student-faculty communication and to facilitate a positive learning experience. It has information on how to work with a student who has a documented disability and how to refer a student to OSD who may be having difficulty in your class.**



**Within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, instructors can also make the curriculum more inclusive by including content knowledge about diversity, justice, and social responsibility.**

and syllabi that are inclusive of diversity. Many colleges have developed courses that bridge complex social issues with scientific knowledge, including understanding genetics to promote human rights (Chamany, 2001), studying the role of science in the development of racial categories (McGowan, 2005), understanding the complex genetics of skin color (Schneider, 2004), and exploring environmental issues to encourage sustainability (McDonald and Dominguez, 2005; Pratte and Laposata, 2005; Walsh, Jenkins, Powell, and Rusch, 2005).

When choosing course materials and requirements, professors need to be mindful that some students may be working while going to college and may have limited financial and time resources. Paying for expensive texts may require them to work additional hours, which may reduce their already limited time for studying, preparing for the course, or engaging in after-class student groups. Incorporating

low-cost options into the syllabus might help alleviate such financial and time pressures and help students be successful in the course.

**Teaching Methods.** Teaching practices can create or inhibit a welcoming environment for diverse students. Lecture-based courses, for example, have been shown to inhibit engagement and learning in college students (Astin, 1993). Teaching strategies that have been shown to engage students and increase learning include project-based and experiential learning, research projects, class discussions, reflective writing, cooperative learning and group projects, student presentations, using student inquiry to drive learning, and allowing students to select topics for course content.

**Ground Rules.** Creating and sustaining a positive classroom climate includes establishing ground rules for discussion and for interactions between students and between student and instructors (faculty and teaching assistants). Making ground rules clear from the beginning is an important way instructors can help create a classroom climate that is explicitly centralizing for diverse students. If possible, instructors should devote a portion of the first class to developing ground rules along with their students and have the rules incorporated into the class syllabus so that there is a written copy or the rules can be emailed to students. If time constraints make such discussion impractical, ground rules that acknowledge the importance of respect for diverse views should be included in the syllabus. By actively and explicitly signaling support for diverse views, faculty can build an inclusive space from the beginning. The message of such ground rules should be that class participants treat each other with respect and that name-calling, jokes, innuendos, verbal attacks, sarcasm, accusations, and other negative exchanges are not tolerated. Learning occurs through sharing and actively listening to different viewpoints, but students need to feel safe to express different viewpoints and to know that their perspectives will be valued and respected. When faculty actively encourage the expression of a broad range of ideas, greater understanding of difference is more likely to occur.

While most students may agree with and follow discussion ground rules, some may violate them

# SETTING GROUND RULES FOR CLASS DISCUSSIONS

All classes—whether lecture, seminar, discussion group, or laboratory section—should have explicit rules for discussion and interactions. If there is time in the schedule, these rules should be developed by the class as a whole at the beginning of the term and distributed on paper or by email. Asking students for input signals that you value their perspective and it is likely that they will take the precepts more seriously. If there are time constraints, instructors can begin the process by sharing a proposed set on the first day of the term or in the syllabus. The objective is to create an inclusive atmosphere and to signal that you are open to the ideas of your students, which is key to their engagement in learning. Classroom discussions provide an opportunity for students to gain skills in communicating and to learn the value of collective exploration. Responses to violations of the ground rules for class discussion should also be discussed at the beginning of the term and be included in the syllabus or distributed once they have been determined. Examples of ground rules or guidelines include:

- Respect the opinions of others in class discussions. When you disagree, make sure that you use arguments to criticize the idea, not the person.
- Be an active listener even if you don't agree with what is being asserted. If you decide to object or make a comment, it should be clear that you were listening.
- Avoid generalizations.
- Don't interrupt.
- This classroom is a safe space for disagreement. The goal of class discussion is not that everyone agree but that everyone in the class gain new insights and experiences.
- When offering an opinion or answering a question, support your assertion with arguments and evidence, not generalizations.
- Don't attempt to dominate discussion. Be open to the ideas and experiences of others in the class.
- If you are nervous about speaking in class, remember that your perspective is valid and the class deserves to hear it.
- If a statement is made that offends you or you think might offend others, speak up and challenge it but always show respect for the person who made it.
- Speak from your own experience. Use “I” not “we” or “you.”
- Be conscious of body language. Nonverbal responses can also indicate disrespect.
- Students whose behavior is disruptive either to the instructor or to other students may be asked to leave the classroom.
- Private conversations during class are not appropriate—especially when others are speaking.
- Texting is not allowed during class. Laptops can be used for note-taking and class-related activities only.
- Class discussions are private and should not be shared without permission.

Sources: Ground Rules, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-dontparticipate/groundrules.pdf>; Guide for Setting Ground Rules, Paul Gorski, EdChange, <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html>; Guidelines for Class Participation, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, [http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p4\\_1](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p4_1); Establishing Ground Rules, Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University, <http://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/establishing-ground-rules.html>

## RESPONDING TO VIOLATIONS OF GROUND RULES



When responding to the violation of ground rules, it is important for an instructor to remain calm and consider the violation a teaching opportunity for all, including the student who violated a rule.

**Be prepared.** Develop strategies for these situations and consider what your own vulnerabilities and “hot buttons” might be. Check out some of the resources provided in this booklet.

**Don’t ignore it.** Ignoring a violation gives the impression that you don’t take the rules seriously.

**Remain calm.** It can be hard to remain calm when students in the class are upset or the situation is divisive, but taking a measured approach will help everyone in the class to stay calm as well.

**Model the behavior you would like students to use.** If a student makes a clearly discriminatory remark such as “You people are always...,”

respond with “I felt upset when you made that remark. I felt that it marginalizes a whole group of people. Can you tell us what you were trying to express?”

**Use inclusive language by reframing.** If a student, for example, speaks heatedly and seems angry, respond quietly by saying, “It sounds like you have a strong opinion about..., I am interested in hearing more. Can you expand on your point?”

**Avoid “you” statements.** If a student interrupts another, don’t say, “Stop! You are interrupting X.” Instead, say, “X was in the middle of making a point. We’d all like to hear the rest of it.”

Sources: Creating Inclusive College Classrooms, S. Saunders and D. Kardia, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/f6>; Interrupting Microaggressions, G. Kenney, Diversity and Leadership Education, College of Holy Cross, [http://academics.holycross.edu/sites/all/files/Center\\_for\\_Teaching/2014%20January%20Workshop/Interrupting\\_Microaggressions\\_January2014.pdf](http://academics.holycross.edu/sites/all/files/Center_for_Teaching/2014%20January%20Workshop/Interrupting_Microaggressions_January2014.pdf)

during the course. Violations of the ground rules for class discussion should always be taken seriously and students should be held to the same standards. Maintaining a positive classroom climate for diversity includes preserving order and civility. Be prepared to respond immediately when a rule is violated. How an instructor responds to such a violation will, however, affect the classroom climate for other students. What should instructors do when a violation occurs? While it is not feasible to recommend specific actions, it is important for instructors to be attentive to the violation and not ignore it. The response needs to consider the long-term development of the student who violated a ground rule as well as the effect of the violation on the classroom climate.

Instructors should prepare themselves with a range of strategies to handle ground-rule violations and seek assistance—from colleagues or the UCLA Office of Instructional Development—to make such situations into teachable moments. In a discussion about immigration, for example, a student might interrupt another, saying, “You’re just saying that because your family is not from America.” First, the instructor should immediately halt the discussion and remind the interrupter of the ground rules, “XX was making a point. We all want to hear her whole comment.” Once the student finishes, the instructor should then address the student who interrupted by saying, for example, “I’m curious. What makes you think XX’s observation was motivated by her family experience? Are you making an assumption about her background? We all have family and other experiences that affect our worldviews and that makes them relevant.” XX should also be drawn into the discussion. By remaining calm and using inclusive, non-confrontational language, the instructor can use the incident to create a learning experience for all. And, it becomes clear that diversity is valued.

The literature on education and inclusive pedagogy can also provide guidance on teaching through conflict. It would be helpful to discuss a set of action responses to ground-rule violations with students on the first day of class or to include them in the ground-rules section of the syllabus. Chesler and Zuñiga (1991) provide an example of how they responded to a heated discussion between students on sexual identity where students were



***When selecting course content, it is important to consider whether the perspectives and scholarship of diverse groups are being represented. Focusing solely on the experiences of one group or on a single perspective is likely to exclude diverse viewpoints.***

not blamed or shamed for sharing their views and learning occurred together. If a student (or students) continues to violate the ground rules, faculty may seek to utilize appropriate means, such as the class participation component of the final course grade, as a consequence for the violations. Finally, being proactive in establishing a classroom dynamic that is explicitly centralizing may help to limit the occurrence of ground-rule violations.

These ground rules generally are directed to classroom interactions, but faculty should mention to students early in the course that the ground rules apply also to student-to-student interactions on social media, during group work, or in labs and discussion sections.

## **SUSTAINING A POSITIVE CLIMATE**

**A**FTER taking steps before and at the onset of the course to develop an inclusive classroom climate, faculty should continue to assess the class dynamic to help sustain an inclusive climate. Throughout the

course, use inclusive language. When lecturing, don't use phrases such as "It's easy to see..." or "I'm sure the answer is obvious to all..." Such phrases implicitly exclude students who may have not understood and discourages them from asking questions. As you work to maintain an explicitly centralizing classroom climate over the duration of the course, you should also consider how your assumptions about students may affect your behavior in the classroom.

## PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS

**A** STUDY by Saunders and Kardia (N.D.) shows that instructors can hold incorrect assumptions about student learning behaviors and capacities. When faculty hold such views, a negative learning environment can result and student learning is undermined. It is the responsibility of faculty members to treat every student as an individual and to focus on the learning success of each student in a class. The problematic assumptions listed below were selected from Saunders and Kardia's list.

### Incorrect Assumptions about Student Learning Behaviors

- Students will seek help when they are struggling with a class.
- Poor writing suggests limited intellectual ability.
- Older students or students with physical disabilities are slower learners and require more attention from the instructor.
- Students whose cultural affiliation is tied to non-English speaking groups are not native English speakers or are bilingual.
- Students who are affiliated with a particular group (gender, race, ethnic, sexuality) are experts on issues related to that group and feel comfortable being seen as information sources to the rest of the class and the instructor who are not members of that group.
- European American students do not have opinions about issues of race or ethnicity and members of other groups do have opinions about these issues.
- All students from a particular group share the same view on an issue, and their perspective will necessarily be different from the majority of the class who are not from that group.

- In their reading, students will relate only to characters who resemble them.
- Students from certain groups are more likely to be argumentative or conflictual during class discussions or to not participate in class discussions or to bring a more radical agenda to class discussions.

Because developing an inclusive classroom climate is an ongoing process, faculty should consider and reconsider their assumptions before the course begins, during the course, and after the course ends.

## STUDENT INTERACTIONS

**K** NOWING more about students and understanding the nature of student interactions in the classroom is critical to creating inclusive educational environments. Interactions among students with differing social group identities may easily replicate the normative power relations in society, which privilege certain groups over others (for example, Adams et al., 2000; Johnson, 2005; Tatum, 2000). By ignoring and not opposing such negative interactions, faculty may be seen to be sanctioning such power norms and create a hostile learning environment for students from historically marginalized groups. Such interactions may also occur between students outside the classroom or over social media. Over the duration of the course, faculty should remind students to share any issues that come up regarding such interactions with other students with the instructor.

## GRADING

**G** RADING practices may also affect the classroom climate. Faculty should be clear about their specific grading criteria and be consistent in their evaluations of student performance. Using different criteria for particular students should be avoided because they may create tensions and unfairly penalize those students. These differing criteria may also be based on problematic assumptions as opposed to accurate information. Examples include having higher expectations for Latina/o students in a Latin American studies class, having higher expectations for Japanese American students in a Japanese language course, or having higher expectations for students of color in an ethnic studies course.

# MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Microaggressions come in many forms in the classroom: instructor to student, student to instructor, or student to student. All have a negative effect on classroom climate. When discussing the merits of a group project, for example, an instructor might exclude the lone female participant, implying that male members of the group had done all the work. Or, a male student might inappropriately challenge a female instructor on a grade.

When addressing student-to-student microaggressions in the classroom, an instructor needs to consider the learning needs of all the students. Dealing with them is not about punishment or finding consensus or avoiding disagreements. It's about creating a space where students can address difference and diversity in productive ways. Further, research shows that leaving microaggressions unaddressed can have as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself. Here are some example situations and techniques for responding:

*When XX suggests that a statement by a character in a novel is offensive to Asian women, another student objects by saying that it's not offensive, it's just reality.*

**RESPONSE:** Inquire. "I see that you disagree with XX's perspective. I'm curious about your reasoning. Can you elaborate on what you mean?"

*A white student says, "I don't see why we have to talk about race all the time, it's not always about race."*

**RESPONSE:** Use paraphrase as a means of reflection and focus on reflecting feelings as well as content. "It sounds like you are concerned and frustrated about the focus of the discussion. What is it that concerns you the most?"

*Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.*

Source: Sue et al. 2007

*A male student responds to a comment with a joke, "Does your mother know you're gay?"*

**RESPONSE:** Use an "I" statement: "I didn't find that joke funny. Please remember our class ground rules and be respectful of one another."

*When asked a question about terrorism, a student suggests that XX (who wears a hijab) would be better able to answer the question.*

**RESPONSE:** Redirect and reframe. "XX can decide if she would like to comment. I'm interested in the perspectives of all the students in this class so that we can think about this topic together. Over the years, many groups have engaged in what we now would call terrorism. Can anyone give me some examples?"

Sources: Interrupting Microaggressions, G. Kenney, Diversity Leadership and Education, Holy Cross College, [http://academics.holycross.edu/sites/all/files/Center\\_for\\_Teaching/2014%20January%20Workshop/Interrupting\\_Microaggressions\\_January2014.pdf](http://academics.holycross.edu/sites/all/files/Center_for_Teaching/2014%20January%20Workshop/Interrupting_Microaggressions_January2014.pdf); Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life, <http://www.microaggressions.com>; Microaggressions in the Classroom, Center for Multicultural Excellence, University of Denver, <http://otl.du.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MicroAggressionsInClassroom-DUCME.pdf>



When grading writing assignments, faculty should be sensitive and supportive of different writing styles, which can differ for cultural, symbolic, or political reasons. Many students may write in ways that on the surface may appear to faculty members to be incorrect or nonstandard English. These styles, however, may be a deliberate form of expression that is in line with a student's ways of knowing, views, or political stance. It is important to recognize that many standards apply when evaluating good writing. Before making the decision to lower a student's grade, the instructor should discuss with the student the use of a particular writing style—for example, using capitals vs. lower-case for “Black” when referring to culture or people or using gender-neutral pronouns. Rather than asserting that such choices are “incorrect,” faculty should discuss the issue

with the student and come to an agreement about standards for the course. Faculty should also use the opportunity to consider their own assumptions.

Grading schemes can have a significant normative influence on student behavior and development. For example, grading on a curve creates and exacerbates competitive environments in classrooms as students objectify their classmates as opponents. Such an environment may impede the development of empathy and altruism (Fines, 1997). As a result, students may engage behaviors that skew the competition in their favor (for example, not sharing notes, cheating on exams, and not sharing information about important opportunities with one another). Grading on a curve is often used as a way to help students achieve higher grades, but other grading approaches may be more appropriate to help students achieve higher scores without compromising class climate and desired student outcomes.

Creating and sustaining a positive climate for diversity in the classroom is essential to making sure that all students in the university are supported and have the tools they need to succeed. Faculty can build and maintain such a climate by actively incorporating inclusivity in course development, syllabi, teaching methods, and interactions with students. If your teaching methods communicate respect and the expectation that all students can succeed in your class, you will be closer to making that success happen.

## RESOURCES: CLASSROOM CLIMATE

“Allowing” Race in the Classroom: Students Existing in the Fullness of their Beings, J.A. Helling, New Horizons for Learning, Johns Hopkins School of Education, <http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/multicultural-education/allowing-race-in-the-classroom/>

Ground Rules for Discussion: A Roadmap for Student Voices in Multicultural Education, D. C. McKinney, <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/yl/1501/150106.html>

Creating Inclusive College Classrooms, S. Saunders and D. Kardia, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/f6>

Diversity and Inclusive Teaching, Center for Instructional Development and Research, University of Washington, <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/OLD/resources/diversitytools.html>

Inclusive Teaching Strategies, Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University, <http://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/inclusive-teaching-strategies.html>

Incorporating Diversity, Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University, <http://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/inclusive-teaching-strategies.html>

Preparing Future STEM Faculty for Diverse Classrooms at University of Wisconsin–Madison, <http://www.aacu.org/campus-model/preparing-future-stem-faculty-diverse-classrooms-university-wisconsin-madison>

Teaching for Retention in Science, Engineering, and Math Disciplines: A Guide For Faculty, M.K. Brown, C. Hershock, C. J. Finelli, C. O'Neal, CCRLT Occasional Papers No. 25, Center for Learning and Retention, University of Michigan, [http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/CRLT\\_no25.pdf](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/CRLT_no25.pdf)

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Whether the class is in a large lecture hall, a small seminar, or a laboratory section, a learning environment where all feel safe, valued, and respected is necessary for students to achieve and demonstrate their full potential. Since a negative environment can be an obstacle to learning, it is essential to understand how to create and sustain a positive climate for all students. Faculty can build and maintain such a climate by actively incorporating inclusivity in course development, syllabi, teaching methods, and interactions with students. *Creating a Positive Classroom Climate for Diversity* provides guidance in using inclusive teaching practices to create a classroom environment that values diversity and encourages success.



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