

Teaching in a Diverse Classroom

1. Provide a diverse education for all children

All children become culturally oriented during childhood. We accept our family's and our communities view of the world, their stereotypes, their values, and their concepts. Children living in the Inuit, Chicano, Indian, or any other culture are forced to confront, examine, and question the cultural assumptions of their home environments. If you recognize the values of each of the cultures represented in your classroom as equally successful, valuable, and valid, then these minority students can retain their self-esteem, confidence in their culture, and their families and people. They are then able to adapt and live in both their culture and the dominant culture.

Minority students should not be given an equal education, but rather a better education. One that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their life experiences, that provides reciprocity in their relations with others, and that gives them responsibility over their own lives.

A diverse education is essential for not only for minority students, but also for those of the majority as well. Those from the dominant group tend to feel secure in their values, way of life, cultural biases that devalue other cultures, the poor, and the victims of prejudice. If they are not challenged by a diverse education nor given the opportunity to understand the motivations, values, and way of life of minority groups, they will be handicapped by a lack of both understanding and the motivation to benefit from cross-cultural relationships, lose ability to work effectively with other groups, and become part of the fearful approach to minorities that seems to permeate our society.

2. Teachers must learn about Minority ways.

Too many teachers and administrators are not knowledgeable about minority group ways, values, beliefs, and cultures. While the minorities are many, and it is an intimidating task, educators must make an effort to learn about their minority students. They must also be prepared to view the cultures and way of life as equally valid approaches though different. By knowing the cultural differences that affect learning, the educator can use the differences to enhance learning. Use the differences rather than opposing them. Neither the educator nor the student should feel pressured to adopt the other's culture which hopefully will lead to mutual respect and understanding.

Educators typically describe minority students as being disadvantaged. In fact, the minority student has the double advantage of being a part of two cultures, knowing and living in two cultures is an advantage. Perhaps, it is the educator who is in reality disadvantaged. If the educator does not know, respect, or understand the minority student's culture, then the students are at a disadvantage in that educator's class. The educator who accepts that his or her culture as being superior without any real thought or study, who knows only one culture really well, and who disrespects minority cultures is disadvantaged, not the students.

If you are to be respected by your students, you must first demonstrate your respect for who they are! By dismissing their cultures, you are exerting pressure for them to change, to become something other than who they are, and to let them know that their culture is inferior to yours. As educators, our actions and words imply that one culture is superior to "Why would anyone want to live on a reservation?" "Why are so many Blacks in prison?" "Why do people on welfare have money to buy drugs, alcohol, and have cell phones?" You cannot expect to teach people to be successful if you do not value them as humans.

3. Value the student's background and provide new learning experiences.

For a learning experience to be meaningful, it must be related to prior knowledge. As you know, ability to score well on standardized tests is highly related to cultural knowledge. In the classroom,

success is highly related to everyday life experiences. Students who do not relate to their instruction will not be motivated and will have difficulty learning. Think about the use of jargon in most fields. How many of us understood the words used by our professors when we first heard them? Cultures have jargon as well. As educators, we need to use examples, words, and ideas that have meaning to all of our students. Even athletes have jargon. Imagine being Brett Farve and not really knowing what a "nickel defense" was, and having the coach tell you to run a play that will work against that defense. As educators, we must make the effort to relate to where students are socially, intellectually, and culturally.

4. Identify positive values in minority cultures

Regardless of what minorities you may have in your classrooms, you cannot assume that all of the minority students reflect the values, way of life, and thinking of the typical member of that culture. Each student is somewhere along a continuum that reflects their culture. Even those who have lost contact with their old culture or their people will usually vary from the students of the dominant culture. They will often vary in experiences, willingness to communicate verbally or written expression, concept of time, knowledge of history, willingness to compete with classmates, ability to discuss versus argue, attitudes toward property, spirituality, and ability to use technology.

Honor the good and useful ideas and ways in both societies. Learn as much as you can about each culture represented in your classrooms, and then find creative ways to include all cultures in a positive way in your classrooms. By honoring the good in all societies represented, you can help students to learn that two opposite approaches can both be correct. Teach students to think for themselves, to know that there are alternatives, and to make their own choices. Do not impose your own thinking upon them, but rather, let them come to their own way of thinking.

5. Develop a positive, serene atmosphere of communication

Real communication between student and teacher is essential for effective learning. Misunderstandings, distrust, dislike of the class or the school, and lack of effort can all be caused by lack of understanding. If students feel free to question your ideas, to challenge each other and you without fear of reprisal, can discuss issues without emotional upset, and that they can ask questions without appearing to be less intelligent or unprepared, then the classroom will be relaxed and effective learning can happen.

While most of us focus upon the student's ability to listen, the key component is our ability to listen to them! Do you try to think of answers to their questions or ideas while they are still expressing them? Do you assume to know what they are asking without making follow-up questions to be sure that you understand them before providing an answer to them? True listening requires that you respect your students and their ideas.

Do not hide or pretend that your errors did not happen. Admit when you make a mistake. your weaknesses, holes in your knowledge base, and your failures. Rather than criticizing their mistakes and failures, focus upon ways to improve their ability to learn. As many politicians seem to be experts on everything, some of us are very similar in our attitudes. We do not know everything. It is perfectly okay to say that I will study that issue, or I will look up information or studies on that topic. When you make mistakes, it is okay to say that I am sorry, or I was wrong about that, or I was wrong to say that about you, or whatever. Honesty is a way to create a positive classroom environment to enhance student learning.

Listen to student's request for help even if it seems to be too simple to explain or not really important on the surface. The student is reaching out to you. Asking for help is a sign of trust. Do not violate their trust. If you listen well enough, students will share their feelings, thoughts, and ideas with you.

6. Expect high levels of achievement from all students

Do not assume that athletes, minorities, females, or other classes of students will not do well in your statistics, methodology, theory, or whatever class. Teachers with high expectations, like coaches with high expectations, get better performances from their students. Having students say that your exams are too difficult is a compliment. If you believe that your students can succeed, they will have higher motivation to succeed. We have to motivate them to want to succeed. We have to convince them that they want to learn. We have to instill the desire to do better each day. Every day, we should give them something that they did not know when they came to class! We have to convince them that they can achieve regardless of what they have done in the past.

7. Motivation is an on-going process

Be an enthusiastic motivator! Enthusiasm is like a disease. It is contagious! It is hard to be bored when you are involved with a class. Enthusiasm tells students that you care about them. It makes others smile with you. It makes fun out of hard work. Do you teach with a spring in your step? A smile on your face? With a voice that has enthusiasm vibrating out of it? Sing a happy song before going to class, and sing it with pep and enthusiasm. It will do wonders for you and your students. If you dread going to class, do you think your students will look forward to it either? Do you let students know that they were missed when they are absent? Do you hope that many do not bother to show up? You have to be motivated to be able to motivate them!

8. Humor is important

Humor is important in all cultures. The ability to laugh at ourselves makes us much less vulnerable to criticism or comments that are not positive. While you may not always understand the humor of other cultures, their way of thinking may be quite different from yours. Humor in the classroom should be acceptable. It is not acceptable to use humor that hurts people! Telling Hispanic students jokes about "wetbacks" would not be acceptable if the purpose was to belittle them. You do not need to be a comedian or try to tell jokes on a regular basis. There are many forms of humor. Therapeutic humor, humor that shows that Durkheim or Weber were humans, and so forth would be better used. Jokes do not translate well, but funny stories, funny cartoons, and funny personal anecdotes work well with all cultural groups.

9. Many learning styles are quite effective for different students

verbal, linguistic learning styles focus upon words and language, and dominate most of our classrooms. Lecture style of learning is typical.

Logical, mathematical styles of learning focus upon recognizing patterns, recognizing symbols and patterns, seeing relationships, and using scientific method as a way of thinking.

Musical, rhythmic learning focuses upon sensitivity to tonal patterns, beats, rhythms of waves and winds, expressing joy through song and dance, using music to ease tensions.

Kinesthetic learning is understanding and expressing ideas through bodily movement. Typing while not looking at the keyboard, swimming, dancing, learning new words or letters by tracing them are all forms of kinesthetic learning.

Interpersonal learning styles are based upon relationships, communications, and understanding. Practice through cooperative learning, creating situations in which reliance on other people is required for success, focused listening, guessing what someone else is thinking, using non-verbal communication.

While all students may use all of the styles, some are clearly more verbal, logical or whatever than others. Each of us has a dominant style of learning, but each also has the ability to enhance the use of other styles of learning. We need to recognize that not all students learn best from our lecture format

or whatever form that dominates our teaching styles. Among the Navajo or Dine, the word teaching translates as showing. Asking a Navajo student to go to the board or whatever in front of the class would not be effective or a positive experience unless the student has been able to observe sufficiently to be able to complete the requested task. They need to observe until they feel competent to do it themselves. They are also noted for not asking questions and for not being willing to answer them. If they are allowed or encouraged to demonstrate their answer, they perform much better. Navajo students are excellent at nonverbal communications. They tend to be visual learning rather than verbal. We must be aware of the different learning styles of our students to allow them to have a better understanding of what we are trying to do and to have a better environment for learning.

If possible, try to apply the principles of sociology to their everyday lives. Their lives, not yours!

10. Build a love of learning that will last a life-time

Problem free classrooms are ones in which the professor enjoys teaching and lets the students feel this enjoyment. Do you have an equal liking for all of your students? Are you compassionate? Is this evident from your actions and not just your words? When they do not answer your questions or do not do well on your exams, do you show them that you still like them? It is okay to like them. It is easy to like most of them. There is always the one that is difficult in any classroom. We need to develop in that one student that is causing problems the desire to learn, to be curious about what we are discussing, to be interested in learning. Focus upon problems, not symptoms. Fear leads to obedience when sanction is present and misbehavior when it is not. Achievement is motivated by interest, self-esteem, and self-respect, not by punishment by lowering grades for late papers, missing exams, or missing classes. Rather than focusing upon their mistakes, focus and reinforce the kind of behavior that you approve, like a well-written essay or research paper, not that it was poor penmanship or late. Show them that you believe in them, that you care about their success, and challenge them to do even better. Spirituality teaches that one can only grow through losses. View their mistakes and failures as opportunities for growth. I often have encouraged athletes who were not doing well to treat their textbooks as "playbooks" as they did in their sport. For many, it was an eye-opening, life-changing experience. With many minorities, the use of a whisper rather than a shouting match will work wonders. Let students know your expectations. Let them know the rules. If you plagiarize on your research paper, you will get a failing grade. Encourage self-discipline. Help them develop their own goals, not ones that you wish for them. Let them make decisions for themselves and to set their own goals. Let them solve their own mysteries! Love of learning is a result of a love of the search for knowledge! Help them search what interests them, not you!

There are no secrets to becoming a successful teacher. Show the students that you care, that you have compassion, that they are important to you, and that you want them to enjoy learning as much as you enjoy learning!