

Making Inclusive and Safer Teaching Spaces

This Guide was developed by the Feminist Research Network in response to student-identified needs. Contributors include Felicity Bell, Tanja Dreher, Nicola Marks, Josh Pallas, Linda Steele, Ika Willis, UOW Allsorts, UOW Ally Network, UOW Feminist Society, and participants in the FRN workshop on this topic. Graphic Design by Shirin Demirdag. Key resource: <http://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/welcomingtips.pdf>

For further background, live links and resources visit: <http://www.uowblogs.com/frn/>

1 Introduction

“This Guide aims to provide easy to use strategies for teachers to work with students to make learning and teaching spaces safer and inclusive”

Inclusive and safe teaching spaces are important to enable the full participation of all students in the diverse UOW community; to demonstrate the university's commitment to respect and social inclusion; and to enable students to develop skills and experience in equal opportunity. Regardless of the subject content, it is important for students and teachers to appreciate that respect and inclusion of each other apply – they are about *how* we learn and *how* we communicate rather than only what we learn.

Recent years have seen greatly increased visibility of trans and non-binary celebrities and heated political debates on LGBTQI rights, while obstacles to trans people's participation in education and employment are slowly being addressed. Any classroom will include diverse students and teachers – whether or not differences are visible or acknowledged. Depending on how teaching spaces are set up, they can either ensure an environment in which difference is respected, or allow behaviours which can make people feel invisible, disrespected or excluded due to assumptions about difference, including gender, sexuality, disability, religion, race and cultural background, class, suburb of residence/origin, migration status.

This Guide aims to provide easy to use strategies for teachers to work with students to make learning and teaching spaces safer and inclusive. The focus is on respect and inclusion for trans and non-binary students, recognizing that stereotypical or traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity can be limiting for everyone. Making spaces that are safer and more inclusive for gender diverse students benefits all students and teachers. The strategies suggested here can be a productive starting point for signaling and maintaining a general commitment to respect, safety and inclusion in any classroom. While the strategies in this resource are focused on trans and non-binary students, they might also provide a foundation for developing strategies appropriate to other groups of students and will generally enhance the inclusivity of classroom for all students.

2 Getting Started: focus on Week One

Pedagogical scholarship has established the importance of the approach and content of week 1 classes in setting the expectations, tone and dynamics of the class for the entire semester. Week 1 tutorial, seminar or lecture is a significant opportunity to establish the class as a safe, inclusive and respectful environment. Part of achieving this involves talking to students about what these ideas mean and what your expectations are of them in realizing these ideas. Another part of achieving this is 'doing' inclusion and respect through activities that generate these behaviours in students (and demonstrate them in us as teachers!)

Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of Country is an important demonstration of the respect that the university and its staff and students have for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Acknowledgement can also be a grounded way in which to start students thinking about their responsibilities to people and place vis-à-vis their own physical and cultural relationships with the classroom, university and the broader geographical area and their place in the classroom, university and local communities in which they are located in at the university. Please refer to UOW 'Guidelines and Protocols for Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of People and Country and Aboriginal Cultural Performances': <http://www.uow.edu.au/about/policy/UOW151341.html>

Establishing Safe and Inclusive Teaching Spaces

Teachers should reiterate to students that none of us can presume to know the identity, backgrounds and experiences of individuals in the class – these are not always ‘visible’ or shared. As such, we must conduct ourselves in a manner that is respectful and inoffensive to difference (While we focus here on gender and sexuality, there are a range of other identities that cannot always be presumed such as disability, religion, race class, migration status) and in a way that does not assume to know another’s identity, backgrounds and experiences.

• **Introductions**

Introductions are important for teachers and students. Students do not necessarily know each other’s names and backgrounds. When we presume or guess we usually are implicitly informed by norms which are embedded with stereotypes and these perhaps ‘benign’ or ‘accidental’ presumptions can have significant impacts on individuals which can be experienced as a form of violence or dehumanization. Introductions are an important opportunity to create connection and cohesion within the class as well as to provide an opportunity for students to name and define themselves.

• **Options for Introductions that set the scene for safer and inclusive teaching spaces**

Seminar leaders should avoid cold-calling the roll first thing in week 1 (students might have different names due to such reasons as gender identity, disassociation from family related to childhood trauma or violence and divorce or domestic violence) or referring to students other than by name (e.g. he, she) without knowing their preferred gender pronoun. The strategies below will enable the teacher to respectfully learn the preferred names and pronouns of all students. It is then important to adjust the working roll accordingly and to make this working roll available to any other teaching staff throughout semester.

Option 1 ‘Pronoun Round’: One way to avoid stereotyping is to allow all individuals to introduce themselves to the class and teacher and identify their name and gender pronoun.

Option 2 Name cards: students can create name cards to put on their desk which you can then cross-reference with photo rolls. This can also enable students and teachers to learn names more easily than by using a sign on sheet.

Option 3 Sign on sheet: circulate a sheet for students to indicate attendance, as well as name and pronoun. Refer to this brief piece on including a column for preferred pronoun: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/09/19/simple-classroom-change-make-trans-students-feel-home-essay>

Option 4 Icebreaker pairs: Students can have a brief chat to a partner in which they cover 2-3 things about themselves such as name, pronoun, favourite food, favourite movie etc. The other student then introduces that student to the class. This might require some introductory explanation re pronouns and preferred names to ensure appropriate introduction of peer to the class.

Reasons for students to care about respect and inclusion

We cannot assume that students will view respect and inclusion as being of intrinsic importance. Students might require additional reasons to persuade them to engage in these behaviours. Thus, additional to activities that can foster respect and inclusion, you might also want to discuss with students why respect and inclusion is important for them in more material or tangible senses. In week 1, this discussion could identify the core principles underpinning class communications throughout the semester. This can also be spelt out in the subject outline.

• **Linking to Student Code of Conduct**

From the UOW Student Charter: Rights include: ‘a safe and secure environment that is free from discrimination, bullying or harrassment’. Responsibilities include: ‘respect the diversity of the University

and broader communities’ and ‘behave responsibly and honestly in ways that are considerate of the rights and needs of others and refrain from behavior that may adversely affect the experiences of others.’

• **Linking respect and inclusion to assessment**

If you have a class participation component to assessment, you might be able to link respect and inclusion to fulfilling the assessment criteria. For example, active and respectful contributions to class and listening (e.g. related to such assessment criteria as ‘ability to actively listen, respect for other’s ideas, no domination, preparedness to listen to others’).

• **Linking respect and inclusion to graduate outcomes and to future employability**

Respect and inclusion are important for UOW Graduate Qualities e.g.: ‘effective communicator: articulate ideas and convey them effectively’ and ‘responsible: understand how decisions can affect others’. Most jobs (notably government and NGO jobs) have a selection criterion on equal opportunity and respect for diversity. Students can use class as an opportunity to develop these skills. If they display them to their teachers this might be noted in any job reference that academic provides to the student. Respect and inclusion are also relevant to many professions that students are training for. For example, if in disciplines where many students go on to teaching jobs, they will be required to implement safe schools and anti-bullying policies in schools. Journalists will be expected to adhere to a Code of Ethics and lawyers will need to work with diverse clients.

Substantive Content

Another part of creating and sustaining a safe, inclusive and respectful class is to be mindful of how we talk (or fail to talk) about difference in the substantive content of the semester. It is important to point out to students that many disciplines are embedded in problematic ideas around difference gender, sexuality, race, ability, class and that while learning the content will involve engaging with the content as it is, students should be welcome to point out problems with the discipline’s underlying assumptions – even if these are implicit. Sometimes the discipline and in turn the teaching and class discussion can circulate these problematic ideas in a way that treats them as self-evident. Students should be encouraged to approach the teacher after class or by email if they have any concerns or would like a particular perspective shown in the content.

3 Keeping On Track

Of course, even with the best setting up in your subject outline, first lecture and/or first tutorial, there can be moments during session when incidents arise and class becomes a less inclusive space. Tips for managing difficulties, getting back on track or staying on track:

Use inclusive language

Use non-binary collective terms such as people, students, folk, class, instead of binary ones (guys, girls etc.). Don’t refer to or separate groups based on gender.

Accidental mis-gendering

If you make a mistake about someone’s pronoun, correct yourself. Going on as if it did not happen is actually less respectful than making the correction. This also saves the person who was misidentified from having to correct an incorrect pronoun assumption that has now been planted in the minds of classmates or anyone else who heard the mistake. As teachers, especially, it is essential that we model respectful behavior. It is very important to correct the mistakes of others, whether or not the misgendered person is present [taken from Dean Spade’s piece, ‘[Making classrooms welcoming](#)’].

Moderating

If a student is mis-gendering another, you can interrupt to correct them and move on. If students are organizing a class activity and proposing to divide the group according to gender, gently suggest another option that includes non-binary students (e.g. according to shoe colour or number of letters in their name). Phrases such as “how about we do this instead”, or “let’s be more inclusive and do it this way” can be helpful here. The Guardian provides a useful overview: (<http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/oct/29/transgender-supporting-students-school-lgbt>)

“The key is in educating students as to why [transphobia] is harmful. I’ve found that the simplest method is by far the most effective: assume ignorance rather than bigotry and explain why it is offensive. I usually start off by saying, “I know you probably don’t mean it this way, but…” and finish off by saying, “so make sure you are presenting your views accurately.” Once explained, adopt a zero-tolerance policy on future transphobia. As with all forms of behaviour management, consistency is key: challenge each and every time. It won’t take long for the message to sink in that you don’t permit transphobic remarks in your classroom, thus creating a safer environment for trans students.”

Calling in rather than calling out

Calling out a student in front of the whole group for making a gender mistake can be upsetting or embarrassing for that student too. So it can be best to call them in to see you at the end of the class, and explain why their language choices were not appropriate. You might want to speak to the person about who the mistake was made too.

Shutting down

Sometimes, something really inappropriate can be said or done in class. Tutors and lecturers should step in and stop it from continuing. You could try saying: “we don’t make jokes like this in this space” or “come on, you know that’s not appropriate”.

Don’t be afraid to refer back to the rules you set up in the first tutorial, or the ones set out in the subject outline if needed. You can remind students that their participation is assessed on their respect for others and their views.

It is vital to do something. Unfortunately, harassment is unlikely to go away on its own. Ignoring bad behaviour including hurtful use of language will allow it to continue and sends a negative message to other students. Almost any response is better than ignoring the situation. You may not know exactly what to say, but you must stop harassment. You can always go back to the student and say or do something else if you feel you did not respond well.

Listening

Remind yourself and your class that respect for others comes not only from the language choices we make, but also how we listen to others and give them space to express themselves.

! Find Out More

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