

“We Gotta Keep Doing the Hard Things”: Learning Strategies for Immersive and Multicultural Experiences

Introduction & Need for Strategy

Teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been described as “dancing through a minefield” (Acosta et al., 2005, p. 26). Those who teach DEI related topics must have a unique set of pedagogical skills, e.g., tools to teach sensitive content and to increase students’ awareness and self-awareness in the classroom (Prieto, 2018). Educators can connect and engage students to learning by incorporating student diversity, equity and identity into their learning strategies (Lovett, et al., 2023). This abstract will discuss three approaches we use to create culturally inclusive learning environments that promote positive and challenging educational experiences.

Connection to Literature

In order to produce a “globally competent” workforce that is prepared to interact with diverse populations and solve 21st century grand challenges, our students must receive multicultural education and training (National Research Council, 2009). However, research (Lim et al., 2009) indicates that the less diverse the department faculty, the less likely courses will include DEI in any form. Moreover, the majority of faculty report they do not feel fully prepared to combat challenges associated with diversity (Talbert & Edwin, 2007). This is unfortunate for students, as many increasingly aim for greater purpose and societal good in their education (Filgona et al., 2020) and would like a better understanding of DEI applications in an agricultural context (Cropps & Esters, 2021).

Culturally relevant pedagogy can enhance students’ engagement and help students make connections (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Further, culturally relevant pedagogy is beneficial because it values how students’ cultural influences, nuances, and experiences shape their learning and is committed to collective empowerment (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2021). It is not only important to implement these practices into the classroom, but also to model these practices so that pre-service teachers, mentors, advisors, and leaders can experience culturally relevant pedagogy.

Additionally, research has shown that critically reflective practices in the classroom are fundamental to students’ preparation as educators and leaders. Critically reflective teaching is defined as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Critically reflective practices prompt students to examine their own assumptions and actions, which contributes to a deeper understanding of factors that influence one’s teaching philosophy (Ossa Parra et al., 2015). These practices require intentionality in classroom activities, care in implementation, and a solid classroom community built on trust and open communication.

Implementation Strategy

Student Choice

In classrooms across the country, the idea of giving students a choice in how they experience their education is becoming a common practice by educators (Lovett et al., 2023; Merrill & Gonser, 2021). Educators can begin to provide safe spaces for students to express and define their identity in the classroom through gathering information in the first week of class. By providing students with a survey at the beginning of class that gives space for them to self-

describe and identify individual characteristics such as race, gender, and preferred name, educators have created a foundation for inclusive learning environments. Once educators recognize the diversity in their students, they can begin to develop more inclusive pedagogy and learning strategies to meet the abilities of their students. Student choice in how they complete their assignments is another way to tap into the diversity in assignment submission. Students learn differently and express the way they learn concepts differently through visual, kinesthetic, auditory and written/verbal learning preferences.

Community Building

Building a community in learning spaces allows students to learn interpersonal skills along with meeting the learning objectives of the content (Lovett et al., 2023). Community time gives students the opportunity to express themselves through various modalities including but not limited to music, art, discussion, case studies and developing a deeper network. Educators who make regular and intentional time in their classrooms to build community may see a deeper connection between their learners and cultivate active listening and reflection.

Reflection

There are different modalities of reflection that can be used that may open the door to a more culturally inclusive learning environment (Gibbs, 1988; Lovett et al., 2023). By incorporating student choice and voice, applications such as Flip for video reflection and guided journaling for written reflection can become useful tools for educators to gauge student learning and development. By embedding consistent reflection in the learning process, it provides space for students to take ownership of their learning experience.

Implications & Advice to Others

When instructors take on the responsibility to create culturally inclusive learning environments, it is important to consider many of the pedagogical considerations and practices mentioned. One of the key outcomes of implementing these practices was the aim to foster a classroom environment that encourages a “partnership attitude”, seeking to equalize power relations and amplify student voices to address social inequality (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2013; Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016). This can be accomplished by cultivating a classroom environment that encourages open discussion by incorporating engaging prompts that foster connection and respect. Instructors must also possess a sensitivity to the classroom atmosphere, understanding students’ reactions to the content and being able to pivot when necessary to foster more effective learning. Additionally, educators must conscientiously manage their personal biases while also “approaching this work with the assumption that culturally competent education is improved when it is delivered in a safe learning environment” (Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016, p. 25). Instructors can begin to understand their personal biases by journaling and reflecting on their backgrounds and experiences and how these may influence their views on different cultures and societal challenges.

As educators continuously work to increase cultural awareness among their students, it is crucial to recognize this is an ongoing growth process for everyone involved. Building safe and brave communities where students learn from one another and engage in meaningful dialogue with those from diverse backgrounds will equip them with skills beyond the classroom setting. With that, educators should be encouraged to “*do the hard things*” because society will greatly benefit from these efforts.

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