

Guide for Reflective Practice: Cultural Diversity in Learning and Teaching

[This 'Guide for Reflective Practice' was developed by the University of Sydney's Cultural Diversity Working Party (CDWP) as a resource for University staff. It was presented to the Learning & Teaching Committee in November 2006; revised in November 2007; and placed on the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL)'s website in 2008. The Guide should be used in conjunction with the CDWP's 'Plan for Cultural Awareness and Inclusiveness'.]

Introduction

This Guide is designed to promote cultural inclusiveness and celebration of diversity throughout the University community by enhancing appreciation for diverse perspectives in learning, teaching and research supervision. We have developed the guide with reference to a range of research projects, policies and reports related to the University's commitment to the ongoing development of an inclusive learning environment.

Cultural inclusiveness is particularly important at an international university like the University of Sydney, where diversity *is* mainstream. This involves understanding and celebrating diversity as an integral aspect of our learning community rather than an element of difference. As a University community, we value diversity within our curriculum, teaching practice and the overall student experience.

The Guide is organised into three sections. The first of these sections shares ideas on fostering, facilitating and navigating an inclusive learning environment for students, teachers, research supervisors, and administrative and support staff. The second section is a Self-Reflection Exercise designed to help all members of the University community examine our own 'cultural awareness', with a view to enhancing cross-cultural empathy. The final section provides links to University websites that offer relevant information, services, and programs.

Approaching Cultural Diversity

As a university community, we aspire to contribute to an environment in which diversity is valued in all its myriad attributes, such as (but not limited to):

- language
- gender
- sexuality
- disability
- age
- Indigeneity
- ethnic heritage
- country of origin
- religious beliefs and practices
- nationality
- family structure and responsibilities
- social and community responsibilities
- political views
- place of residence
- educational background
- mode of dress or appearance

Rather than concrete, fixed 'characteristics', aspects of cultural diversity coalesce and impact upon the way we all interact with the world, shaping personal values, modes of interaction, choices, expectations and aspirations. The term 'cultural diversity' reflects the unique qualities specific to each one of us.

Ten Ideas for Teachers: Fostering an Inclusive Learning Environment

The following suggestions are designed to assist teachers, tutors, research supervisors and other teaching staff in creating and maintaining an inclusive learning community that values and respects the perspectives and needs of individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds:

- Approach every interaction with the assumption that the person you are dealing with is well intentioned, and respond positively, even if the situation may seem strange to you.
- Provide an overview of learning activities and outcomes and explain academic standards and expectations regarding assignments, such as marking criteria and assessment timelines.
- Provide and direct students toward resources that will help them understand and adopt appropriate practice.
- Explain subject-specific terminology clearly and concisely. Invite students to seek clarification if they do not understand material that is being discussed in a lecture, tutorial, or supervision setting.
- Whenever possible, allow students plenty of time to formulate responses to questions or comments.
- Remember that some colloquial expressions may not be understood by all students, and may require explanation. It is often helpful to paraphrase or restate colloquial expressions in 'plain English', including questions or comments raised by students.
- Encourage students to reflect on their cultural influences, remembering that diversity is a learning opportunity for all.
- Provide examples from diverse cultural groups, ensuring that material does not overgeneralise or reinforce stereotypes about particular cultural groups.
- Avoid treating any student as 'representative' of his or her cultural group, keeping in mind that every individual has their own unique cultural influences.
- Present material in a way that includes a diversity of international, national, and local (including Indigenous) perspectives.

Ten Ideas for Students: Navigating an Inclusive Learning Environment

- Approach every interaction with the assumption that the person you are dealing with is well intentioned, and respond positively, even if the situation may seem strange to you.
- Make an effort to be open and inclusive when forming groups for class activities and arranging group meetings and tasks. We learn more from interacting with difference than from interacting with people similar to ourselves.
- If you are unclear about expectations relating to learning assessments, activities, or outcomes, or you do not understand something that is discussed in a lecture, tutorial, or research supervision setting, seek clarification from your teacher / supervisor.
- Communicate clearly with your teacher to arrange late arrival or early departure when circumstances make this necessary.
- In written communication, such as email, be sure to tell the teacher your name and what class or tutorial you are in.

- In emails to your teachers, avoid using sms (text message) type spelling.
- When arranging meetings with your teacher or supervisor, it is good practice to send an email inquiring what dates and times your teacher / supervisor is available, and letting them know if there are particular days that conflict unavoidably with your schedule (e.g. 'What date would be most convenient for a scheduled meeting? I am available any time except Thursday afternoons and Fridays').
- If you ask your teacher / supervisor to write a reference or complete a form, it is good practice to give them the details and / or paperwork as early as possible. It is also appropriate to acknowledge this favour by sending your teacher / supervisor an email of thanks, and also to let them know the outcome if (for example) you are applying for a job.
- If you feel quite strongly that you want to give your teacher or supervisor a 'thank-you' card or small token of appreciation, be sure to wait until *after* your marks are formally released by the University. (Please be aware that large gifts are not appropriate, and also that you are certainly not obliged to give your teacher / supervisor anything.)
- Be conscious of the perspectives of all students within the learning community and frame questions and comments in a way that is respectful and inclusive of other students.

Ten Ideas for Administrative & Support Staff: Facilitating an Inclusive University Community

- Approach every interaction with the assumption that the person you are dealing with is well intentioned, and respond positively, even if the situation may seem strange to you.
- Make every attempt to refer students to relevant services that might assist them in their University experience.
- Take time to familiarise yourself with information regarding Student Services.
- Practise patience and empathy when dealing with students who may not yet have developed high level communication skills in English.
- When communicating with students, ensure that you use 'plain English' and avoid colloquialisms and slang.
- Be mindful that students' knowledge of University policies and procedures is likely to be limited, and explain relevant directions and concepts clearly and completely.
- Whenever possible, give students a contact name and clear instructions about procedures when making referrals to another unit, department or service.
- Remember that students who are in difficulties may be affected by their personal circumstances (especially International Students) in ways that are difficult to understand.
- Whenever possible, listen to students' queries, comments, and concerns in their entirety before responding. Even if you think you already know the nature of the question, there may be individual circumstances that you need to be aware of.
- Remember that the information you give can be crucial in informing students' future decisions and choices.

Self-Reflection (For Students and Staff)

In thinking about the significance of culture within the learning environment, it is often helpful to start by examining one's own 'cultural self-awareness'. Often aspects of cultures other than one's own seem particularly noticeable or different, perhaps even strange. It is very easy to forget that each individual is affected by his or her own cultural background. In short, what seems unusual to you may be perfectly acceptable in another culture, while your modes of interaction might be surprising to someone from another cultural background. You might start by making some observations about your own cultural influences:

- What cultural groups do I identify with?
- How do my experiences working, living, or studying within different cultures affect my practices in the learning context?
- What interactions within the learning environment do I find especially challenging?
- How might my own cultural background affect my interpretation of these interactions?

You might find the following Self-Reflection Exercise helpful in exploring how you interpret situations within the learning context.

Reflect on your immediate reactions to the following social scenarios. How do you think your cultural background affects your 'reading' of these scenes? How might someone from another cultural background interpret the same scenario? (We have tried to write the scenarios in ways that will be equally applicable to staff and students.)

How would I react if someone:

- looks down or away from me when speaking or being spoken to?
- does not say 'thank you' when receiving a favour or service?
- stands physically very close while talking to me?
- touches me frequently on the arm during a conversation when I have only just met them, or do not know them very well?
- assumes I am available for an internet chat in the evening?
- begins an email without a salutation or greeting?
- begins to speak before I am finished speaking?
- nods or shakes their head at times when it does not seem to mean either 'yes' or 'no'?
- does not say 'goodbye' at the end of a conversation?
- engages in a loud personal conversation in a crowded location, such as a bus or train (including conversations on mobile phones)?
- states 'I will come and see you at 12:00pm on Wednesday', without first asking whether I am available at that time?
- assumes the gender of my partner when inviting me to a function?
- does not say 'Excuse me' after bumping into me?
- ignores my dietary requirements (including alcohol) when catering a function?
- sits on a table or desk during a tutorial?

As you reflect on what your reaction would be to each of these situations, try to isolate the various cultural influences impacting your reaction. When you are able to recognise the influences of your own cultural background, it may become easier to understand the perspectives of persons from cultural backgrounds other than your own. Remember, while reflection can often help us deepen our awareness and understanding of different cultures, we also need to recognise that our knowledge will always remain incomplete.

The next question might be, what should I do differently following my reflection? We suggest referring back in this document to our ideas for teachers, administrative & support staff, or students.

In addition, if you want to explore some of these issues in greater depth, you might want to browse the references and resources available on the ITL's diversity website <http://itl.usyd.edu.au/diversity/>.

Links

Staff and Student Equal Opportunity Unit's Cultural Diversity website:
http://www.usyd.edu.au/eeo/cultural_div/

International Student Support Services Unit
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/issu/>

Counselling Service:
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/counselling/>

Learning Centre
http://www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/learning_centre/

The WriteSite (requires Unikey login):
<http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/>

Koori Centre
<http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au>

Yooroang Garang Discipline of Indigenous Health Studies
<http://www.fhs.usyd.edu.au/yg/>

Institute for Teaching and Learning Diversity website:
<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/diversity>

SydneyLearning website:
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/sydneylearning/>

EO Online (a self-paced online professional development program in equal opportunity, discrimination and harassment issues for all University staff):
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/eeo/home/online>

Oxford Brookes University: Teaching in a Diverse Classroom
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnrch/diverse.html

Flinders University Diversity Toolkit
<http://www.flinders.edu.au/cdip/Toolkit/tookit.htm>

The University of Melbourne: Supporting Cultural Diversity
<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/>

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