

## *Gender Equity in the Classroom and Beyond:*

# 12 Evidence Based Teaching Strategies to Create a Productive and Inclusive Classroom Climate

### 1. Examine your assumptions.

It is very common for instructors to assume that students share their own background, but this is not necessarily so. Do you find yourself addressing students as if they all share your religion, sexual orientation, or economic class? Assume that in every class you will have students who self-identify as LGBTQIA: In any given class you are likely to have at least one student who self-identifies as LGBTQIA, who has a family member who self-identifies as LGBTQIA, and/or who has a friend who self-identifies as LGBTQIA. If we keep that in mind, it can help to remember to avoid using language or examples that are non-inclusive. [See also our “Checking Your Assumptions” resource.]

### 2. Learn and use students' names and preferred gender pronouns (PGP's).

Chatham classes tend to be small, which makes learning student names easier! You can start with a few names and build up. At the very least, let students know you are making an effort to do so. One technique is to ask students to state their names before every comment they make in class for the first couple of weeks: it can be awkward for the first day, but then students often appreciate the exercise as they also learn their colleagues' names. You might also consider asking students to state their preferred gender pronouns (PGP's) on the first day of class. This inclusive practice allows students to self-identify and helps to challenge assumptions we all make based on gender presentation. We never want to force a student to say more than they wish, but this practice changes norms and can provide an enormous sense of relief for those who are rarely given the opportunity to name themselves. [To familiarize yourself with emerging PGP's, see our “Understanding Sex, Gender, and Sexual Identity” resource.]

### 3. Model inclusive language.

Most basically, avoid using masculine pronouns and terms for both males and females (for instance, “First Year Students rather than “Freshmen”). When you use American idioms, explain them for the benefit of non-native English speakers. Be familiar with and comfortable using the common terms that LGBTQIA students use to self-identify themselves in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression: LGBTQIA students make up a diverse group and use a variety of terms to self-identify themselves. Listen to the way your students self-identify and use the same language they do.

Using inclusive language means talking in a way that does not specify a gender, sex, or sexual orientation. For example, instead of using terms such as “boyfriend,” “girlfriend,” “husband,” “wife,” or “spouse,” you can use “partner” or “significant other.” Or, instead of using terms such as “mom and dad,” you can use “family,” which would be inclusive of students who have single

parents, stepparents, LGBTQIA parents, or any alternate family structure. Also, use “sexual orientation” or “sexual identity” rather than “sexual preference” or “lifestyle.”

Note: Make sure you never disclose a person’s sexual or gender identity without their permission. This information should be considered confidential, and you should not reveal it to anyone else unless the student has given you permission to do so.

#### **4. Use multiple and diverse examples.**

Multiple examples increase the likelihood of students relating to at least one of them. Take care to include examples that speak to individuals across the gender spectrum and that work across cultures.

#### **5. Establish ground rules for interaction.**

This will assure that other students are also being inclusive and respectful. In order to generate maximum buy-in to the ground rules, you can engage the students in helping to write them on the first day of class. You will still need to enforce the ground rules and correct students for the occasional non-inclusive or disrespectful comment. [See also our “Establishing Ground Rules for Interaction” resource.]

#### **6. Examine your curriculum.**

Think about whether certain perspectives are systematically not represented in your course materials (for instance, a course on family focusing only on traditional families, or a course on public policy ignoring race issues). Neglecting some issues implies a value judgment, which can alienate certain groups of students. Whenever possible, select texts and readings whose language is gender-neutral and free of stereotypes, or cite the shortcomings of material that does not meet these criteria so that students are aware of it. Think carefully about assignments that ask students to describe their personal lives, either in writing or during class discussion; you don’t want to create a situation where students feel forced to come out or to pretend to be heterosexual out of fear of how you or the other students in the class might react.

#### **7. Strive to be fair.**

It is crucial to be perceived as fair, both in grading and in implementing course policies. Perceptions of unfairness can induce feelings of learned helplessness, which are highly demotivating for students. One strategy for courses where you will be assigning a participation grade is to keep a running tally: assign a score after every class (for instance on a scale of 1-3) when your memory of the actual discussion is fresh.

#### **8. Be mindful of low ability cues.**

In their efforts to help students, some instructors inadvertently send mixed messages. A classic (and hopefully waning) example is: “Sure, I’ll be happy to help you with this, I know women tend to have more trouble with math.” These cues encourage attributions focused on permanent, uncontrollable causes, which diminish students’ self-efficacy. Instead, it is more productive to focus on controllable causes, such as effort.

#### **9. Attend to other inequalities.**

Gender is not the only inequality operating in our classrooms. We experience multiple and intersecting identities and systems of power at the same time, including race and ability. Be sure you are attending to this intersectionality. For example, recognize that women of color are often silenced twice, for reasons of both gender and race. Also, be sure you are providing reasonable

accommodations to students with documented disabilities, as required by law. You can contact our PACE Center for more information.

## 10. Don't ask people to speak for an entire group.

Students who are in a minority group on campus often report either feeling invisible in class, or sticking out like a sore thumb as a token. This experience is heightened when they are addressed as spokespeople for their whole group, and can have implications on performance. Since members from an underrepresented group may feel the effects of gender, ethnicity and race in different ways, be careful not to assume that all the female students in your classroom have similar attitudes or experiences or that their concerns about gender will be more pressing for them than, say, race or class or religion.

## 11. Practice inclusive classroom behaviors.

Researchers have documented the small unconscious behaviors – “micro-inequities” – that certain student groups experience repeatedly. For instance, in traditional co-educational classrooms women report that instructors tend to interrupt them more often than men, ignore them more often, call on them less often, ask them more recall questions and less analytical questions, acknowledge their contributions less, and build on their answers less. To combat the highly discouraging cumulative effect of these micro-inequities, consider these strategies:

- *After you ask questions, look around the room to make eye contact with both male and female students.* Use this eye contact as nonverbal encouragement for student participation. Check yourself to see that you're not looking mostly at those students closest to you.
- *Watch students for nonverbal clues that may signal interest or disagreement, and call on them in addition to those who raise their hands.*
- *Be aware of the nonverbal clues you may be giving to students as they speak.* For instance, leaning forward, which suggests interest, or looking at your watch – can have an important effect on which students speak again.
- *If you find that you consistently lecture or sit next to certain students, move to new locations, or move around the room as you speak.*
- *Increase your wait time for responses.* Average teacher wait time is one second, but a wait time of 3-5 seconds produces significantly more, and better responses from more students. You might have to ask your question, and then count off the seconds to yourself before you call on students. You can also have all the students write a quick response to your question, and then pick someone who might normally be hesitant to speak to report to the class. Or, you can form students into pairs, and have them briefly share responses with each other before you call on individual students to report their ideas to the class (“Think-Pair-Share”). Don't always call on the student who raises their hand the fastest or who solves the problem first. You can tell students that you will not call on anyone for several seconds so they can think through their answers. This prepares them for the silence that follows and encourages everyone to think.

## 12. Address tensions early.

If you are closely monitoring the climate and it becomes apparent that you or others are inadvertently shutting people out, marginalizing others, pressing someone's buttons, or so on, you want to address the situation before it gets out of hand. This may mean apologizing for yourself and others: for instance, saying something like, “I'm sorry if some of you interpreted my comment as ... “. Or take a student aside after class to explain, “Some people believe it is racist or sexist to say, xyz.”

You want to confront comments that are heterosexist, homophobic, or biased in terms of gender identity or expression right away. It is important to respond to comments that use non-inclusive or derogatory language or that rely on stereotypes or assumptions, especially comments made in the classroom. When inappropriate comments are made, all eyes will be on you. How you respond to such comments sends an important message to all the students in your classroom. [See also our “Handling Hot Moments” resource.] It can help to remember that traditionally aged college students are often learning to manage their emotions and sometimes don’t know how to express them appropriately. In cases like this, it can help to discuss intent versus impact, for example, saying, “You probably didn’t mean this, but some people might interpret your comments as sexist because ... “ This strategy protects students who make unsophisticated remarks so that they don’t shut down, which would prevent further development. But at the same time, you are acknowledging the frustration of the rest of the class.

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These teaching strategies were adapted by the Women’s Institute at Chatham Univeristy from the following sources:

Ambrose et. al., *How Learning Works: 7 Research Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

“A Short Checklist for the Gender Inclusive Classroom,” Brandeis University. [[brandeis.edu/gsas](http://brandeis.edu/gsas)]

“Best Practices to Support Trans and Non-Binary Gender Students,” Campus Pride. [[campuspride.org](http://campuspride.org)]

“Create an Inclusive Learning Environment,” Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon University. [[cmu.edu/teaching](http://cmu.edu/teaching)]

“Gender Dynamics in the Classroom,” Teaching Resource Center, University of Virginia. [[trc.virginia.edu](http://trc.virginia.edu)]

“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom,” Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.

“Ways to Create an Inclusive Classroom Environment,” Safeplace, Michigan Technical University. [[safeplace.mtu.edu](http://safeplace.mtu.edu)]