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Diversity Statement

As a scholar and teacher, I value diversity and am committed to inclusion and accessibility for all students regardless of age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, physical or cognitive ability, economic status, or other category. The following are ways I work to include all my students and promote an egalitarian environment.

Classroom Dynamics

On the first day, I inform students our class is built on the “Potluck Model” of education (tipping my hat to Paulo Freire, of course). This metaphor of a potluck dinner makes students aware that we will produce knowledge primarily through social construction—that is, by sharing our opinions and observations freely. I explicitly validate students’ ideas when they share—drawing special attention to those instances when someone says something I’ve never heard in over a decade of teaching—and we voluntarily commit to preserving a no-judgment zone not only by refusing to judge others for their ideas or identities but also by assuming that others might merely be trying on an idea or identity to discover how it sounds or fits. Our potluck thus becomes a space where all are welcome to participate regardless of race, sex, gender, politics, academic prowess, or other characteristics.

Furthermore, I employ an online discussion space outside of the classroom because doing so gives those who are shy or who desire more time to consider their responses an opportunity to participate on their own terms. I also utilize assorted classroom strategies to vary the conditions of participation; for example, a “Think, Pair, Share” activity lets students first engage solo, then in small groups or pairs, and then with the whole class. I find that my more introverted or reserved students benefit from such an approach.

Course Design

I repeatedly examine the design of my courses to ensure they do not unintentionally discriminate. For example, when considering my attendance policy, or whether to allow late work and with what penalty (if any), or whether to allow students to revise their essays for a higher grade, I carefully weigh the learning objectives against the demands of real-world employment and the needs of individual students—and I try to value those considerations more highly than I do “tradition” or “the way I was taught.” The results are encouraging. For example, though I am often presented with letters of accommodation from students with physical and cognitive disabilities, I have rarely needed to make accommodations for the simple reason that my course design already has most types of accommodations built in.

I also ensure that my websites and course materials are fully accessible to anyone regardless of differences in vision, hearing, mobility, or other factors, and I make alterations when necessary, as when I taught a deaf student in a fully online class that met synchronously with audio and text, requiring a real-time transcriber and other modifications.

Grading Practices

Because grading writing is a largely subjective exercise, I employ strategies to make my work as fair and consistent as I can. My primary method of grading these days is conference grading, wherein the student and I meet in person. During the meeting I read the student’s paper aloud, and we discuss our

responses to the writing as we go. This makes grading a dialogue rather than a pronouncement, and I find that students are more invested in their work and interested in improving when they see that I am just as vulnerable to them and they are to me—and that I am open to multiple perspectives about a paper’s success. Additionally, this method ensures each student gets the same amount of my time, focus, and attention. For those who are uncomfortable meeting face to face, I offer online meetings, and I offer traditional written feedback when appropriate.

Another approach I use is that I give students leeway to bend writing assignments to serve their majors, career goals, or other interests, and I alter my grading criteria accordingly. For example, when students do a literature review, I grade an engineering major’s work differently than I grade a nursing major’s, helping each student see the conditions of success that their major invokes. Likewise, for my [Current Event Coverage Report](#) assignment, I allow international students to focus on the news media of their home country or region.

I myself have worked and studied overseas, thus becoming the linguistic and cultural “other,” and I have worked at places such as the Texas Tech University Writing Center, which specializes in tutoring EFL learners; therefore, I am aware of and sympathetic to international students and others who struggle to become proficient in “standard” English. When grading the work of non-native speakers, I am careful to make accommodations for their difficulties while simultaneously helping them identify paths to improving their mastery of the language. I am frank with students both about the myth of a “standard” English and about how that myth persists in the workplace and elsewhere.

In Practice

My classroom tends to be a lively place where more than a few students regularly participate. More than that, my students tend to freely share personal beliefs and opinions because they know they won’t be judged for them, and this open sharing often allows our class discussions to be deeper and more fulfilling as a result.

I teach at Brigham Young University-Idaho, where more than 99% of the student body practices the same religion and conservatism is the political norm. Many of my students feel either that everyone is the same, or that they are the lone outsider and must maintain a low profile. But in my class, we celebrate difference, using it to fuel our growing understanding of critical thinking. As students grow more comfortable with each other and our potluck approach, they begin to reveal their own heterodox beliefs or practices, and I am consistently impressed at how welcoming they are of difference even within the same faith tradition. During the Current Event Coverage Report unit, students regularly volunteer information about their political views because they see that outing themselves as conservative or liberal is less risky than failing to examine their positions. And though they regularly express their frustration with the state of political dialogue nationally, they report that our classroom is an overwhelmingly constructive space to examine political and social ideas.

I also work for inclusion outside of the classroom. For example, BYU-I does not recognize or sanction a local group of LGBTQ students and their allies, so I have made my office a safe space for those students who cannot be out on campus, and my family has become friends with and advocates for several members, offering our support and mentorship. I have also worked with students and colleagues who are survivors of sexual harassment and assault.