BIOLOGY DEI

Diversity | Equity | Inclusion

Increasing Classroom Inclusivity:

What if crisis is the new baseline for our students?

By Prof. Heather Olins

The last two years have been challenging for almost all of us. When things are hard for everyone, they become near impossible for those who were struggling previously. Our most vulnerable students have been hit hard, and this elevated level of stress isn't going away any time soon. In addition to the global pandemic there is war, domestic injustice, and ecological catastrophe - to name just a few of the crises weighing on us. I was speaking with a colleague recently who described our needing to think in terms of inevitable, impending crises. I used to treat a crisis as a rare extenuating circumstance that a few students might experience in a given semester. **I now assume that at any time some of my students are struggling in profound ways.** I try to remember that many students will never share their struggle with me. If I accept that some of my students are always facing substantial challenges, and if I believe that it is my job to help students succeed and make the most out of their college experience, then I need to find new ways to support my students. I need to support them even though I may not know the specific challenge(s) they face. It is important, of course, to offer support to students who are able to ask for it. But waiting until someone asks for help may not be enough.

One simple intervention to help all students succeed is to **build flexibility into course design**, and be transparent about the reasons for this flexibility. In my courses this flexibility often looks like dropping the lowest scores for different assignment types. In a recent course, I created a system of grading and assignments such that any student could effectively miss a week's worth of assignments without a direct impact on their final grade. I obviously don't want my students to "check out" for a week, and very few did, but having the flexibility helped them perform at their best.

I have also tried to **create more space for connection and reflection**. Two years ago it did not occur to me to prioritize these things in a large introductory science course. But if I want students to engage with the content I care about, I need to help them discover/uncover the ways in which it is relevant to their lives. I need to provide opportunities for them to identify why they care about the content. Small low-stakes (i.e., credit/non-credit) reflections, or "think, pair, share" type discussions in class are two ways that I have found particularly effective for doing this. These activities can also provide a chance for students to speak to each other, which helps them feel connected to each other. This requires me to believe in the value of these activities enough dedicate class-time for it, and generally this means trimming some of the content and aiming for deep engagement of fewer topics.

Take-Home Messages for Creating Inclusive Classrooms:

- It is challenging to be a college student even under the best conditions.
- Some students face nearly impossible circumstances, especially during the pandemic.
- In order to be equitable and inclusive, we need to design our courses for students who are struggling the most.
- We can increase the inclusiveness of our courses by:
  - increasing **flexibility** in course design
  - creating more space for **connection and reflection**
  - integrating more **diverse voices** into the curriculum
  - incorporating **creative approaches** into testing and final projects

Reading & Resources

What Faculty Learned in 2020. BC Center for Teaching Excellence.

- Results of a University Council on Teaching survey of BC faculty
- Emphasizes the need for simplicity, flexibility, connection, structure and communication in the pandemic classroom.

Cura Personalis & Community Building. Boston College Center for Teaching Excellence.

- CTE recommendations for caring for the 'whole person' in BC classrooms.

Course Workload Estimator. Rice University Center for Advancement of Teaching.

- A tool for estimating how much time students will spend on their assignments over the Course of the semester.

Upcoming Events

2022 BC D&I Summit - May 25
Creating a Culture of Inclusion and Belonging

- A full-day conference addressing issues related to diversity and inclusion at BC and beyond.
- Biology DEI will be exhibiting our work!
- Learn more and register here.

Father's Day Virtual Event - June 16

- Researchers from the Center for Work & Family will share their findings on gender and caregiving.
- Register here.

Connect

Share your ideas and events:
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My students need to be able to envision themselves in my field, and I need to highlight experts that they can identify with. There is a vital need to **authentically integrate a variety of voices into the curriculum**, and to acknowledge that the field historically excluded—and continues to marginalize—people of different backgrounds. I began this process by interviewing different scientists and sharing those interviews with my students. I am now working to more thoroughly bring the work of the interviewed scientists into the curriculum itself by tying in quantitative skills including graphical analysis.

In my upper-level electives, I've tried to **re-think final projects to facilitate deeper engagement, and tap into students' creativity**. Rather than give a final exam, or requiring all students to write a research proposal, I experimented (successfully!) with a semester-long project on a course-related topic of student's choice. Students researched their topics through primary literature, then translated the technical research for a general audience through Wikipedia editing. Finally, they communicated what they've learned in a final project format of their choosing. I first did this in a semester where attention was fractured, students felt isolated, screen fatigue was intense, and I was not excited by the prospect of reading 40 similar final papers. Many students welcomed the flexibility and the opportunity to express themselves creatively in a science class. I believe that most put in more effort, and got more out of the final project than they would have if it had been more traditional. Added flexibility brought challenges: some students were uncomfortable with the unfamiliar format, others just wanted to know what they needed to do to earn an "A", and evaluating a wide variety of project types equitably posed challenges. A detailed rubric along with peer- and self-evaluation made grading easier for me and less ambiguous for the students. I had no idea how much joy I could experience grading finals!

Biologists have discovered that a bit of stress is good for us – keeping us alert and engaged and even building resilience. Without this acute stress we get bored. However, it has also been shown (and, of course, known outside of scientific research) that too much (or chronic) stress is incredibly harmful. The background level of stress in the world has increased substantially and seems unlikely to decrease dramatically in the near future. If we do not adjust our course structure, our assignments, and/or the ways that we interact with students, we run the risk of pushing our students into debilitating stress, rather than helping them to achieve their best through appropriate use of rigor and high expectations.

If you can't fly then run,
if you can't run then walk,
if you can't walk then crawl,
but by all means, keep moving.
-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.