



Description

When thinking about teaching diversity or helping students become anti-racist, we often imagine many hours of lesson plans and big activities. This resource focuses on the small, daily changes we can make in our classrooms to help our students be more open to difference, less judgmental, and more likely to counter prejudice in themselves and in others. The following changes, especially when accompanied by explanation, can help make your classroom one of welcome and inclusion every day and not just on those days devoted to learning about diversity.

Grade Level: All Grades

Purpose

To help teachers incorporate habits and activities into their daily routines that

- Encourage students to embrace difference
- Encourage students to develop a mindset of hospitality rather than hostility
- Challenge stereotypes, language, and practices that promote “insider/outsider” thinking
- Make issues of diversity accessible, meaningful, and fun

Before You Begin

You may institute these habits and activities at the beginning of the year or at any time during the course of the year, making these changes all at once or bit by bit. However you choose to make changes in your classroom, it is advisable to discuss why you are making these changes. Your discussion might focus on wanting to make your classroom a place where all feel welcome, on wanting to help students develop the skills and practices necessary to being open and hospitable people throughout their lives, or even on dismantling prejudice through our daily activities. One idea for getting students excited about making these changes is leading them in a discussion of what they



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would like to see happen in the classroom that would make them feel more welcome and included and how they would change the classroom and their own behavior to make someone who was new to the class or different from themselves feel comfortable in the class. Beginning with students' own ideas will help ensure that they participate in the changes. They will probably come up with some great ideas that aren't listed here!

LANGUAGE

The way we and our students use language is especially important. Much of the language we use assumes that we and our students are from the "majority" or dominant group or are the "norm," and too often we use sexist, racist, or violent language without even realizing it. Even when we avoid overtly prejudicial language, we can send subtle messages with our vocabulary and examples. When lecturing, discussing, and reading, consider what terms and examples might be uncomfortable to some of your students. Ask yourself who might be left out by your language, students' language, or language in your books. Correct yourself and students when needed. While this may seem overly "politically correct," if we change the way we talk about things we become more conscious. For example, if you always refer to people owning and living in houses, you leave out a great number of students who live in condos in the city, or whose families cannot afford to buy their homes, or those students who might live part-time with their divorced parents, one of whom lives in an apartment. Thinking about your language in this way makes you and your students more sensitive to socio-economic and familial diversity.

Examples

- **Challenging Slurs:** most people do not use slurs intentionally, but when slurs are used they should be challenged publicly by the teacher. This may make you uncomfortable, but allowing slurs to go unchallenged sends the message that your classroom is not safe for everyone. You do not need to shame the student who used the slur, but might simply say, "I'm sure you didn't intend to hurt feelings, but I am upset by your use of the word '_____' because it demeans a certain group of people."
- **Surprising slurs:** There are some words and phrases that we use that we may not even realize are offensive to other groups.
 - For example, "gyp" can be seen as a reference to the Roma (often called Gypsies); asking students to sit "indian style" or saying that someone is "low man on the totem pole" makes assumptions about the culture of First Nations/Indigenous (Native



American or American Indian) people; calling something “gay” assumes that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is stupid and worthy of scorn; “white knight” implies that heroes are white; referring to a “black mark” indicates that dark things are bad.

- Many words and phrases are not slurs *per se* but send a clearly biased message, such as the phrase “welfare queen,” which has been used to call up images of black women on welfare; referring to someone as “special” is a roundabout way to say that someone is mentally disabled; to refer to someone as “flamboyant” is often a way to indicate that someone is gay.
- Many adjectives get attached to various groups and are even meant as compliments, but using them implies that it is surprising that this person is exemplary in some way. For example, the adjectives “articulate,” “well-bred,” and “gentleman” often get used to refer to individual African Americans who differ from prejudiced assumptions about what an African American person should be like. To say that a Mexican-American is a “hard worker” or speaks English well makes other kinds of assumptions. Indicating that a person is “normal” when referencing his or her ethnic or social group makes clear that their group is not thought to be “normal” in general.
- **Creating “Others”:** The language of “us” versus “them” is prevalent in most languages and cultures because it is a clear way to categorize information; however, using “them” to describe another group can be demeaning and serve to make clear that “they” are not “us.” Encourage students to use proper nouns when referring to another person or group: “Susan” instead of “she”; “Arabs” instead of “them.”
 - **First Caution:** when students categorize any group of people, whether while using proper nouns or pronouns, ask if they think what they are saying is true of “all” of that group. Encourage students to qualify their statements by using “some” or by making clear what evidence they have for their statements. The idea is not to hobble students but to make clear that we can rarely categorize any group easily.
 - **Second Caution:** We can create others unintentionally just by identifying their group. We may want to emphasize that a member of a certain group was successful in doing something and, thus, might say “A black student has been named valedictorian this year” or “A working mother has particular challenges.” These indicate that somehow it is unusual that a member of this group is doing whatever he or she is



doing. Ask yourself if you would mention the race, sex, class, orientation, or ability of the dominant group in similar circumstances. You probably wouldn't mention that a white student was receiving academic honors or that a father worked outside of the home.

- **Examples that Exclude**

- **Just for the “In” Group:** As teachers we use examples to make our subject come alive, but we must be careful not to use the same examples over and over again. Using only sports examples leaves out those students who are not athletic; while using examples that refer exclusively to married parents with multiple children leaves out a wide swath of students whose parents never married or are divorced, who are being raised by grandparents and so on. Consider how examples you use might favor the dominant group in terms of race, income, sexuality, ability, academic interest, etc. This is not an argument against using examples but for using a variety of examples.
 - **Making Assumptions:** As a continuation of the above, remember when using examples or referring to students' experiences not to assume that everyone is the race or ethnicity that they appear to be, that students are being raised by their biological parents, that students are “straight,” that students' parents went to college or are legal residents, that girls or boys wish to pursue gender-traditional occupations, that students speak English at home, and so on.
- **A Special Word on Sexist Language:** Making our language egalitarian is particularly hard because so many of the words we grew up with are gendered, such as “policeman” and “chairman,” but continuing to use gendered language sends a strong message to students that certain jobs are meant for men and that women must mold themselves to fit those positions (if they can hope to attain them at all). Practice using gender neutral terms such as “police officer,” “fire fighter,” “chair / chairperson,” etc. If you get tripped up while trying to do so, explain to your students why you are trying to be conscious in moving away from sexist language. If you are really up for a challenge, discuss with your students how supposedly equal terms have been gendered over time, with the masculine word being favorable and the feminine word being less than. For example, governor/governess, master/mistress, priest/priestess, actor/actress, steward/stewardess, etc.



- **Using the Correct Term:** Many of us are anxious to use the “right” terms when referring to various groups. This is particularly difficult as terms often change over time to reflect new sensibilities and as old terms accrue too much negative baggage. The difficulty increases because some terms are acceptable when used by members of a group but not when used by people outside of the group and other terms are found acceptable by some members of a group and not by others. Some general rules: don’t use any term that you know has negative connotations, ask if you are unsure, and pay attention to what terms are being used in reputable media (national news programs, major newspapers, etc.) and how those terms are evolving.
 - **A General Guideline of Preferred Terms:**
 - People of Color **rather than** Minority or Non-White
 - African American or Black **rather than** Colored or Negro
 - Latino/a **rather than** Hispanic. Even better is to refer to someone’s country of origin, such as “Mexican,” “Guatemalan,” etc.
 - Woman **rather than** Girl or Lady
 - First Nation or Indigenous **rather than** Native American or Indian (although many First Nations people use “American Indian” and “Native American”). Even better is to use the name of the tribe, such as “Hopi,” “Navajo,” etc.
 - Gay and Lesbian **rather than** Homosexual
 - Physically Disabled or Differently Abled **rather than** handicapped or crippled. Even better is to use “people first” language, such as “a man who uses a wheelchair” or “a woman with cerebral palsy,” etc.
 - The above are merely guidelines. Not everyone will agree on which terms are best, and language is bound to change over time.
- **Violent Language:** Although violent language does not directly include or exclude any one group in our classroom, it does contribute to our unconscious culture of violence and our sense of safety; thus, it is worth noting and trying to avoid. Reconsider violent images, such as “I could have killed/shot myself,” “I wanted to strangle/murder him,” “We slaughtered/killed the other team!,” “She battled cancer,” “You have to conquer your fear of tests,” etc. Again, sometimes language of victory and conquest is appropriate, but we should all be aware of how often we use violent language and make sure we use it when it makes the most sense and most impact rather than using it indiscriminately and unconsciously.



GROUPS

Many of us use student groups as part of classroom learning. Either we assign group projects, create small groups for discussion, or put students in groups to meet a variety of learning styles. The way we design groups can further our goal of encouraging diversity and hospitality in our classrooms.

Examples

- **Mix It Up:** Create groups that reflect the diversity of your classroom; remember, diversity is more than what you can see. Be sure to mix introverts and extroverts, high and low performers, English dominant with English learners, high income and low income students, etc. Do not let students choose their own groups because we all naturally tend towards grouping with those who are most like ourselves. Create new groups periodically so that students get to work with the widest variety of students in the classroom.
- **Get to Know One Another:** Build time into group work for students to get to know one another. Provide an ice breaker (a brief game or activity that provides a “no-stress” way for people to interact) when forming new groups and create a ritual for the group to use each time it gets together. These should include sharing some basic information with one another, whether that’s name, birthplace, favorite hobby or music, etc. The ritual might include a check in about how each student is feeling that day or about the project right now. Taking a few minutes for personal connection emphasizes the importance of valuing the humanity of each person rather than seeing other students as a means to the end of finishing a project or getting a right answer. Time to learn about one another also allows students to dispel their stereotypes of other groups as they get to know people from different groups (even if those other groups are just “athlete,” “theater person,” “band member,” or “goth”).

HOSPITALITY

Encouraging students to be welcoming and hospitable is another way to help them become naturally inclusive. Through teaching and reinforcement, you can help your students to develop the skills of inclusion. Most teachers are aware of this when having guest speakers or visiting students and remind students to introduce themselves, to be polite, and so forth. However, it is important to help students be hospitable to one another at all times.



Examples

- **Include All:** Notice when a group is working together but one student is off to the side or silent; encourage the group to include that student either through your own example or by directly asking the group to do so.
- **Think of Others:** When planning a project or event, encourage students to ask, “Who is being left out?” Students might plan their presentation on Authors of the American South and leave out authors who are female, African American, or from a First Nation unless they ask that question. When putting together a panel of speakers for career day, they might overlook careers that don’t require college if they don’t think about which students might feel left out of the current panel.
- **Look for the “Outsider”:** Remind students that they must always scan the classroom, the lunch table, the gym, and the party for the person who is standing alone or off to the side. Encourage them to include that person by welcoming him or her, making conversation, and including that person in the activities.
- **Practice Social Graces:** This lesson is especially important outside the classroom, too, such as on field trips and at competitions. Help your students develop the skills of introducing themselves to people they don’t know, including people in their groups, avoiding “insider” conversations, and making social conversation. The more confident students are with people who are not part of their immediate social group, the more open they will be to all people with whom they differ.

REPRESENTATION

We are all profoundly influenced by our environment, which includes all that impacts our senses from hearing to sight, from smell to taste. When we try to broaden students’ horizons, we must take a look at their total environment. Many teachers are very careful about choosing inspiring messages for the posters they put up on the wall, and many schools carefully construct nutritionally and ethnically balanced meals for the cafeteria. There are even more ways to shape the environment so that students interact with diverse people, cultures, and ideas, and there are also ways to represent diversity that are not helpful.



Examples

- **People:** You cannot change who you are, but you can model comfort with your own race, religion, gender, and social group; embrace your whole self and multiple identities. You can also expose your students to a variety of people through video, guest speakers, articles, books, and web sites. If you want to make clear to students the diversity of peoples' backgrounds, be sure to do so for all people. If you want to focus on racial diversity, mention that someone is "white" or "European American" just as you would that someone is "African American," "Asian American," or "Latino."
 - **Caution:** While students should feel comfortable with their own identities and discussing them publicly, they should not presume to speak for *all* of any of the groups to which they belong, nor should the teacher ask a student to do so. It can be tempting when there is a student from a 'minority' group of any type to treat that student as an expert on that group, but to do so puts the student on the spot and assumes that one person can speak for an entire group.
- **Full Representation:** If you are holding any kind of celebration about race, language, customs, etc., be sure to include the dominant group, too. If only the non-dominant groups are represented, it suggests that they aren't fully part of the community and, thus, need a special day or time to be represented. It also suggests that the dominant group does not have a culture. For example, if there is an "International Day," but students of European heritage don't participate, they learn that there is nothing special about their culture(s) or, perhaps worse, that they are somehow without race and, thus, the "standard." This can lead to them feeling culturally impoverished and/or culturally superior.
- **Take it Seriously:** Do not reduce the study of diversity in your classroom to food, festivals, and figures. In other words, there is more to any culture or group than their food, celebrations, and handful of famous figures. While it is fine to study these things, they do not provide a depth of cultural understanding. Challenge students, too, to uncover more than just food, festivals, and figures about their own and others' cultures and history when writing papers or making presentations on other countries and/or cultures. We would not think that the United States was adequately understood if someone studied only hamburgers, our contemporary celebration of the Fourth of July, and the biography of George Washington; we should not attempt to learn about others in such a cursory way.



This resource provides a few simple ways that teachers can make small changes in their classrooms to send a powerful message to students. By taking care with language, expectations regarding student interactions, and representation, we send the message that all people, all cultures, and all groups matter in our classroom. Even students from the dominant groups will feel safer and more welcome in an environment where no one is made fun of and everyone is respected. In many ways, making these changes are more important than one-time lessons because they enter into your classroom culture and, we hope, your students' lives and behavior. To extend these ideas further, consider working with other teachers to become more conscious about race and racism and creating a Diversity Club at school; resources to help you do both are available at www.racebridges.net/schools.

RESOURCES

Davis, Barbara Gross. "Diversity and Complexity in the Classroom: Considerations of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender." <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/diverse.htm>

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People can Work for Racial Justice*.

Lee, Enid, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (eds.). *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development*.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*.

Saunders, Shari and Diana Kardia. "Creating Inclusive College Classrooms." Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/P3_1.html

"Teaching for Inclusion." <http://ctl.unc.edu/tf2.html>

