Syllabus Challenge: Infusing Diversity & Inclusion

Instructions:

- The main goal is to analyze your syllabus (and eventually the full course) for potential improvements that infuse diversity and inclusion throughout.
- Keep in mind that diversity and inclusion attends to a broad range of topics such as those listed to the right (not an exhaustive list).
- Choose one course syllabus.
  - helpful to also have readings list, course schedule, assignment instructions, & texts available.
- Use this challenge to conduct a step-by-step analysis of your syllabus.
- Take notes on areas in your syllabus that need attention within the space provided on each page.
- Try not to feel overwhelmed. Even if you choose 2-3 items to address this semester, you can build in more inclusive practices each new time you teach the course.

Diversity/Inclusion Topics:

- Privilege/the role of power
- Intersectionality
- Systemic/institutional-level
- Social class/first-generation
- Disability
- Religious/non-religious
- Race/ethnicity
- Sex/gender
- Sexuality/sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Age
- Immigrant status/citizenship
- Language of origin
- Global/transnational

Take Action!!!
General review

- Current terminology referring to groups
- Avoid generic use of male pronouns; use singular “they” instead of him/her
- Check for cultural phrasing that may not translate for English learners or even out of state students
  - Students asking to submit late work are barking up the wrong tree
  - Cram for a test
  - Quizzes will be a piece of cake
  - Take a raincheck

- Visual appeal-
  - Does this syllabus follow a traditional format of all black words on a white page?
  - How could visuals, color, graphics, etc. help engage students with this document? Maybe they will even read it!!

- Accessibility- how will this syllabus work for visually impaired students?
  - Will colorblind students be able to read the syllabus?
  - Consider multiple formats (black/white, color, digital uploads)
  - Avoid pictures of words because reader software may not read the words within an image.
  - Tag images with a verbal description within digital syllabus.
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Professor Information

- Contact information & office hours
  - Change “office” hours to “student” hours to let students know this is their time to visit.
  - Make it explicitly clear that you encourage office visits and invite students to chat with you after class.
  - Many students from marginalized groups assume they should not bother the professor, while privileged students assume they should make use of the professor’s time.
  - Include your preferred pronouns to model behavior: she/her; he/him; they/them

- Add personal touch
  - Include a picture of you to help students see you as a real person.
  - Why not share some personal information (that you feel comfortable sharing)? Pets, hobbies, background, surprising facts about you that make you human and approachable.
  - All of these additions to the syllabus make a difference to students who feel they do not belong at the university.

- Teaching philosophy
  - Include a portion of your teaching philosophy. This gives students a chance to understand your approach to their learning.
  - Address your inclusion, equity, & social justice values early on in the syllabus.

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**Course Description**
- Is your description language clear and free of academic jargon that students entering your course may not understand?
- Include pre-requisite course info (many first-generation and other marginalized students are unaware of the importance of pre-reqs).

**Learning objectives/goals**
- Consider diversity, inclusion, & equity in relation to your course content or your field as a possible added learning goal (or goals).
- Are there any learning goals to add that would speak to students’ own cultures, identities, backgrounds, lived experiences?

**Texts and Readings**
- Textbooks- consider the high costs $$$ of textbooks for students from poverty or low-income backgrounds. Could the less expensive book or open ed resources serve your learning goals?
- Do you use all of the required texts? If not, consider making them recommended rather than required.
- Are all additional readings available well in advance of when they are due (at least 2 weeks)? Even better, can they ALL be made available week one? Many students with family/work obligations or first-generation adjusting to college life are better served when materials are made available to them in advance rather than last minute.

NOTES: My Syllabus/Course
Syllabus Challenge: Infusing Diversity & Inclusion

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Assigned Readings/Authors

- Who is represented in the readings in terms of topics covered? Considering your own privileged identities, what areas require more attention as they may be invisible to you?
- Who is represented in the readings in terms of authors? Are there other readings that could be assigned (or even replace some current readings) written by authors from marginalized groups?
- Representation of one’s own group in a discipline could affect choice of major, sense of belonging, staying in a major, self-efficacy, & academic success.
- Do texts support deficit models that blame marginalized groups for inequality? Choose strengths-based readings that address institutional-level oppression (systemic discrimination).

Topics/themes/content

- Is “diversity” covered in a boxed-off portion of the course? How can you begin to infuse diversity, equity, inclusion, & social justice throughout the content rather than sending a message that diversity is a separate topic?
- How can you adjust examples used in lectures to cover a variety of identities, cultures, and marginalized worldviews?
- When covering a theory or research by scholars who are also people of color, disabled, women, or LGBTQ+, be sure to explicitly state this information so that students know your discipline includes diversity.
- Perhaps even show pictures of these scholars. Yes, this may take some learning on your part to identify and include these marginalized scholars.
Culturally-responsive pedagogy:

- Who are your students?
- Are there ways to include relevant content connected to your students’ lives, social identities, & cultural backgrounds?
- Marginalized students are more engaged & show better academic outcomes in courses with culturally-responsive content & pedagogy.
- e.g., COVID health disparities & direct impact on communities of color & low-income people; summer 2020 protests against police violence

Schedule & due dates

- Make it clear, then stick to it.
- Changing dates may have negative impact on students with work and family responsibilities (first generation, older, single parents, often women and students of color)
- Is the course schedule for the full term clear from the start of the course?
- Are all due dates clearly marked?
- Are due dates scheduled to avoid falling on marginalized religious holidays? (e.g., Jewish; Muslim; Baha’i)
- Are late policies & appeals to the policy made clear? When some students ask for extensions, how do you ensure that all students receive the option for an extension?
- Again, privileged students tend to ask, marginalized students tend not to ask.
Syllabus Challenge: Infusing Diversity & Inclusion

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Assignments

- Are the instructions for papers & projects spelled out clearly such that students from all backgrounds are able to follow? (think about first-generation, international, working-class, returning/older, students with disabilities)

- Are group work expectations and any boundaries associated with group work spelled out clearly? Don’t assume all cultural definitions of “cheating” match your own definition.

- Do assignments encourage students to engage in real-world application and/or problem solving?
  - Real-world application empowers students to apply to their own culture, identities, backgrounds, contexts (creates inclusive environment & can boost sense of belonging).

- Are there rubrics associated with papers & projects? Could rubrics be added?
  - Are there sample student works from previous terms that can be shared (with permission)?
  - Transparency in expectations & grading practices help students meet the learning goals set forth by the professor. Research shows transparency can decrease equity gaps in academic success.
  - Consider having the class help you create the first rubric. This facilitates discussion of what a high quality paper looks like versus an average or poor quality paper.

Exams/quizzes

- Are exams accessible to visually impaired students?
- Are makeup policies clear such that all students will understand how to request a makeup exam?
- Are examples used on exams representative of diverse social identities?
Syllabus Challenge: Infusing Diversity & Inclusion

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Policies

- Participation/Discussion guidelines
  - Are there guidelines for respectful participation, such as disagreeing with a position, but NOT attacking an individual?
  - Do the discussion guidelines address student awareness of how much time they take up talking in class (too much; too little)?
  - Some from marginalized groups will feel less comfortable speaking up in class. Will this hurt their grade if they do not participate as often as students from privileged groups?
  - Do the discussion guidelines encourage brave spaces (having courage to learn even when we are uncomfortable)?

- Is there a statement on diversity/inclusion making these values clear? (use something from the university or craft your own)

- Is there a statement on names/pronouns sending a message to transgender and gender non-binary students (& their peers) that their identities will be respected in your classroom?

- Technology needs for course & where/how students gain access
  - What if a student in poverty or a low-income student does not have a smart phone or home computer?
  - What if they have a computer, but do not have the software needed for your course?
  - Do any activities in class assume all students have certain technology in hand?

- Student services (not just the writing center)
  - Does the syllabus include accessibility options and the contact information for disability services?
  - What about resources on campus such as women’s center, LGBTQ+ resources, multicultural center, English learning services, first-generation services?
Let’s stay in touch!

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For social justice academics:

Looking for community, motivations, and connections to pursue your social justice career and activism dreams? The Enough Squad community of social justice academics provides support, belonging, and guidance to lift you up.

Drop your email at the link below to get Enough Squad news, resources, updates, and tips for success.

12-week Online Course: WHITE ANTI-RACISM AND ACTION

I designed this course for white people ready to begin the lifelong process of unlearning racism and taking anti-racist actions. Read more details here.

Preview the Breaking Silence course podcast (2:30 min) featuring sample quotes from the 32 experts interviewed for the show.