Diversity and Inclusive Teaching in Nursing Education: 

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Inclusive Teaching: What is it?

The term inclusion in higher education is often immediately linked to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, for very good reasons. The term “inclusive teaching” broadens inclusivity to mean teaching practices that intentionally support meaningful and accessible learning for all students. Inclusive teaching requires the use of teaching strategies that both consider the backgrounds, needs, and diversity of all students, and seek to create a learning culture and climate where students regardless of age, biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, education, socioeconomics, politics, religion, ability, or beliefs feel valued, voice their ideas, and have equal access to learn. Dewsbury (2017) defined inclusive teaching as a “philosophy of teaching that provides equal opportunities for all students to have a successful learning experience” (p. 2).

These are challenging times for nursing education. The coronavirus pandemic has upended teaching and learning in multiple ways, and the whole world is wrestling with racial and social injustice. In light of the impact of these current forces, the purpose of this article is to present a brief argument for why inclusive teaching is important in nursing and to suggest the following steps to make your teaching more inclusive:

1. Self-reflect: Begin with you
2. Set the stage: Introduce inclusivity early and often
3. Create assessment with inclusion in mind
4. Provide diverse role models
5. Understand your student body

Inclusive Teaching: Why is it Important?

Minority inclusion in the nursing profession nationally and in nursing education specifically, demonstrates a strong lack of diversity. In the nursing workforce only 19.2% of registered nurses represent minority backgrounds (AACN, 2019). In nursing education 34.2% of entry-level BSN students (AACN, 2019) and 15.9% of full-time nursing faculty (AACN, 2016)
represent minority backgrounds. The content and inclusive strategies presented in this article are in no way exhaustive, but rather a place to begin to examine why these demographics have moved little in recent years and how nursing education can be part of the solution.

In my experience, nursing faculty are an extraordinarily caring group. We care passionately about our teaching, our students, our profession, our colleagues, and the health of our communities. We care about the ill, the underserved, the disadvantaged, the at risk. As the most trusted profession (Gallup, 2020), we take very seriously our professional code of ethics and our obligations to respect the human dignity of all people (ANA, 2015). However, nursing in higher education is not immune to the societal issues of discrimination, exclusion, and the silencing of diverse perspectives that are currently at the forefront of our collective national experience. Even COVID-19 pales in comparison to the devastating evidence of continued injustice suffered by groups within our society.

The recent AACN Learning Across Multidimensional Perspectives (LAMP) Culture and Climate Survey (2019) of 32 nursing schools with HRSA-funded programs to enhance nursing workforce diversity, revealed almost 41% of respondents overall (faculty, students, and administrators; N=3892) reported subtle discrimination and microaggressions within their nursing programs. Fifty eight percent (58%; N=846) of nursing faculty agreed with the statement “Subtle discrimination and microaggression may exist in the structure of the program” (For more information on microaggression, see Dr. Carter’s excellent article “Responding to Microaggressions” in the April Diversity Digest). Additionally, nursing faculty have reported inadequacy in addressing racial inequity in the classroom (Bennett, Hamilton, & Rochani, 2019). Clearly, despite our ethos and reputation, examination of teaching practices to enhance inclusion in the classroom is timely and crucial to foster true caring within our programs.

Finally, the topic of this article reflects the AACN Diversity, Inclusion, & Equity in Academic Nursing Position Statement (2017) which promotes diversity, inclusion, and equity as central to our mission as nursing faculty. Nursing faculty need to look deeply and critically and personally at our role and responsibility in eliminating everything that subverts our ethical obligation to respect human dignity.

Inclusive Teaching: How do we do it?

A unique opportunity to begin or continue your journey toward inclusive teaching is the Cornell edX MOOC titled Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom (https://www.edx.org/course/teaching-learning-in-the-diverse-classroom). Thanks to the AACN Diversity and Inclusion team, I discovered and successfully completed the course in March 2020. The five-week course is fully online, free, and for educators from any discipline. The course explores the five components of each classroom (teacher, student, pedagogy, curriculum, and context) through a lens of inclusion. Content focuses on implications of social identity and intersectionality, pedagogical strategies for empowering inclusion, universal and learning-centered design, and professional and university culture. I found the course to be a model of effective online education, and I highly recommend it for my nursing colleagues.
Inclusive Teaching Strategies Across Differences

Kachani, Ross, and Irvin (2020) present inclusive teaching strategies as similar to many good teaching strategies already in use, but with intentionality and thoughtful planning. First and foremost, inclusive teaching requires personal awareness and sensitivity to a whole host of differences that make a class unique. Everyone who shows up in a classroom, teachers and learners, brings along a complex and unique identity, shaped by heritage, values, experiences, personality, and socialization. We all know this, but what we may not acknowledge is the social advantage or disadvantage group identity confers. Some groups are more dominant and have more privilege than others. Some people are included, and some are excluded. Awareness of who might be experiencing exclusion in class, is a necessary first step.

To create an inclusive classroom, faculty need to become acutely aware of what we think we “see” and what we don’t “see” related to who our students are and what they bring to a diverse classroom. Our own biases and assumptions about others and our own positions of power and privilege need to be excavated and examined. Think about how it feels to be excluded, then determine how you can make certain every student in your class feels the opposite: valued, heard, respected.

Secondly, inclusive teaching will require an examination of course activities, documents, and assignments with the motive to explicitly and transparently promote inclusion. Evidence-based teaching strategies generally promote student engagement. Here, viewing and adapting teaching strategies with a lens of inclusivity will potentially promote engagement across the host of differences found in a class. From my reading, my study in the Cornell course, and my experience in my own classes, the following are some strategies to help develop inclusive teaching in the nursing classroom.

Evidence-based Inclusive Teaching Strategies

Many excellent resources are readily available for teaching strategies that specifically address inclusive teaching. For example, see:

- [Inclusive Teaching Strategies](University of Washington)
- [What is Inclusive Teaching](The Ohio State University)
- [Creating Inclusive College Classrooms](University of Michigan)
- [Inclusive Classroom Climate](Yale University)
- [Strategies for Inclusive Teaching](Washington University in St. Louis)
- [Guide for Inclusive Teaching at Columbia](Columbia University)

Additionally, below are selected strategies to increase inclusivity in the classroom:

1. **Self-reflection**: begin with you.
   - Educate yourself on uncomfortable topics. Here is a short list of recommended readings:

- Prepare in advance for responding to current events of social injustice and uncomfortable conversations in class; acknowledge, hear, and support minority voices.
- Prepare to share who you are (your interests and passions, your intersecting social identity, your professional expertise, how you apply the course content, etc.).
- It is okay to misunderstand, but institute a pause, when something feels wrong; own your misunderstanding and make it right.

2. **Set the stage** on the first-class meeting with some activity that lets the class know you believe your students are more than what you “see”.

- Personal identity wheel activity to understand intersectionality: [https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/08/16/personal-identity-wheel/](https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/08/16/personal-identity-wheel/)
- Institute a pre-class or first class survey to get to know your class (Sample questions: what would you like to be called; what pronouns do you prefer; what motivates you; what would you like to know about me; what would you like me to know about you). Include statements in the syllabus that reflect respect for each person; specifically review in class your intention to be inclusive.
- Collaboratively create class discussion guidelines. A few examples from *Guidelines for Classroom Interactions*:
  - Share responsibility for including all voices in the conversation.
  - Listen respectfully.
  - Be open to changing your perspectives based on what you learn from others.
• Understand that we are all bound to make mistakes.
  ▪ Additionally, in subsequent classes, decrease anonymity and build community in your class. Activities can include think-pair-share; use of name cards; group work, etc.
  ▪ Establish a growth mindset in your class: intelligence is not just a genetic endowment but grows through a practice-failure-practice cycle (Norman & Bridges, 2018; Yong, 2017).

3. **Assess student learning for inclusion**: course and assignment goals and objectives must be explicit and transparent.
  ▪ Set clear standards, give timely feedback, and make assignments clear.
  ▪ Use clear rubrics.
  ▪ Implement Universal Design.
  ▪ Provide examples of good work that serve as a model for student success.

4. **Provide diverse role models** in readings, guest lecturers, and case studies.
  ▪ Understand that content selected can facilitate or deter inclusive teaching.
  ▪ Medicine has historically held a privileged position in healthcare. The contributions of the nursing profession and nurses of diverse backgrounds to health can be discussed as a model for disrupting privilege.
  ▪ Carefully select case studies and do not imply minority groups are ubiquitously disadvantaged.

5. **Understand your student body**
  ▪ Access your university demographic statistics to understand the composition of the student body (first generation college, students of color, number of states and countries represented, etc.).
  ▪ Develop or use a college/school level diversity dashboard to foster understanding of who constitutes each class.

**Inclusive Teaching: When is it Needed?**

Obviously, the time for inclusive teaching is right now. Inclusive teaching simply requires adjusting evidence-based teaching strategies using an understanding of inclusion broadly defined. There is no one correct way to create an inclusive learning environment just as there is no singular way to be an outstanding educator. What is required for both conditions are reflection, awareness, and a desire to delve into our own beliefs and values around difference, right/wrong, truth, and human dignity. Additionally, inclusive teaching demands a willingness to
change, to take risks, and to innovate teaching strategies. First, we must faithfully examine our own inner selves and look outward to examine and appreciate the individual identities, values, contributions, needs, dreams, and goals of those in our classrooms (in place or online). Next, we can apply an inclusive teaching lens to evaluate the content and teaching strategies across courses and curricula. Finally, context matters; who we are, where we are, what we teach, who we teach, and how we teach matters. Our profession, communities, faculties, and students need us to address the great challenge of inclusion before us. The call is urgent; the time is now.

References


