

Inclusion by Design: Tool Helps Faculty Examine Their Teaching Practices

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Are there barriers to inclusion lurking in your courses?

After meeting at a diversity and inclusion session of the 2013 Professional and Organization Development Network (POD Network) Conference in Pittsburgh, the three of us set out to develop a tool to help faculty examine their courses through a diversity lens. We were driven by a lack of available resources that provide a practical approach to digging deep into the nuances of one's course.

So how does one examine course diversity, given there are so many points of entry into the conversation yet varying degrees of faculty interest and commitment? We decided the best place to start is the syllabus. After all, it's customary for those who teach in college settings to develop and/or at the very least use a syllabus to guide their courses. That makes the syllabus the perfect focal point for faculty to explore difficult conversations and contradictions about inclusion, exclusion, diversity, privilege, power, and possibilities for transformative change in the barrier-laden structure of college classroom.

We spent a few years of designing and wrestling with what to call our creation (tool, audit, survey?) and eventually decided that it simply was a 'tool' to explore inclusion in one's syllabus and course design. In our ongoing research, deliberations, and presentations of this tool at national conferences, three areas of intentional exploration emerged: inclusion and course context; text; and subtext. The complete tool is rather lengthy and exhaustive, rooted in theory and research on inclusion, multicultural education, universal design, implicit/unconscious bias, and the hidden curriculum (a full version can be found by visiting <http://bit.ly/inclusionbydesign>). For the purposes of this publication we therefore present a brief snapshot of the overarching categories that highlight how the tool can help instructors examine the text, context and subtext of any course.

Inclusion and Course Context: A guiding question to explore the context of a course is, how does the context of the course support inclusive learning? We ask educators to reflect on the following:

- What are the situational factors surrounding your course?
- Who are the people that will be in your class? Who will not be there?
- What is the course content? Whose voice is heard? What perspective dominates? What is omitted?
- How is the content relevant in the "real" world and for the learners in your class? How can it be made relevant for those who may not recognize its relevance?
- What is the common pedagogy in your class – the philosophy and practice behind your instructional choices?

Inclusion and "Text": As educational developers who have depth and experience in course design, we clearly recognize that the transformation of one syllabus is not enough to address the range of inclusion issues present in any course. In fact, we argue that a transformation of how one thinks about learning and course design is the greater aim. In this respect, we follow the guiding question, How do learning outcomes, assessment, and content support inclusion for all? We ask faculty to examine the tone of their syllabi – is it inviting? Staying true to our training in backwards design and deep learning, we ask faculty to examine the types of learning outcomes (cognitive, behavioral, affective), the variety of assessment, and the teaching and learning activities they will use to achieve learning outcomes: Do they use culturally responsive teaching approaches, flexible or fixed assessments, shared teaching, or co-learning approaches in their classroom? This section is best used with faculty who have experienced course design principles or who have had more lengthy course re/design experiences.

Inclusion and Subtext: In this section of the tool we ask the following questions to encourage instructors to dig deep into the subtext of their course and make the learning process more inclusive and visible for students:

- What are the implicit rules and messages of your course and are they stated in your syllabus?
- What are the hidden/implicit/unconscious biases and stereotypes?
- Have you, the instructor, made your philosophy of teaching and learning explicit, or does it remain hidden?
- Is the tone of your syllabus contractual, inviting, learner centered, authoritarian, or energizing?

Paths Forward: Although the tool is comprehensive, it is by no way complete. The nature of its aims and the complexity of the topic will continue to make it a work in progress. Practicing what we preach, we feel such a tool on inclusion should be inclusive and integrate vantage points of a broad network of educators to grow its effectiveness. Therefore, we are in a continuous state of seeking feedback from faculty on the quality and use of our work. Beyond refining the tool, we aim to nourish deeper conversations about inclusion and diversity in hopes of transforming college classrooms by working with professors on their own approaches to course design.

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Inclusion By Design: Survey Your Syllabus and Course Design

A Worksheet

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This survey tool was designed for you to examine a particular syllabus and course design to get a broader perspective on inclusion in your actual teaching practices. We have organized this worksheet in three sections: 1. The context and design of your course. 2. The “text” of your syllabus and course design. 3. And the subtext of your syllabus.

1. Inclusion and Course Context

Examine situational factors by writing short answers to these questions.

A. People: Who will most likely be in your class? (Consider student characteristics such as race and ethnicity, gender, class, ability, religion, language, geographic region, sexual orientation, ability/disability, first generation college, other invisible status, etc.)

B. Content: What different perspectives and viewpoints are included in the course content?

C. Relevance: What ways are there to connect the course topic and content to your students and the real world?

D. Pedagogy: What are the pedagogical choices available to you in your discipline and how diverse are they? (Examples: lecture, team-based learning, problem-based learning, socratic method, simulations, role-play, debate, service learning)

E. Values: What values do you intend to instill in this course? (Examples: Inquiry, community, discipline, deliberation, critical thinking, value of difference)

F. Climate: How will differences of positionality/opinion/thinking be handled in the classroom? How can you create safe spaces for both visible and invisible minority students?



2. Inclusion and “Text”: Syllabus and Course Design

In this section, you summarize your thoughts quantitatively, using the five-point scales provided. In addition, you may want to write short explanatory notes for each question that provide examples and/or describe why you selected a particular score.

To create a summary score for how inclusive your syllabus and course design are, add the quantitative responses to all questions that you find relevant for your course, then divide the resulting number by the number of questions multiplied by five. A result close to ‘0’ means your course lacks inclusion; a result close to ‘1’ means your course is highly inclusive.

Frame and Tone of the syllabus

A. Tone: What is the balance between inviting, friendly, and supportive sections and rules or prohibitions in your syllabus? Is the syllabus written in an inviting, friendly, and supportive tone, or is it mainly a list of rules and regulations?

Rules and regulations					Inviting
	1	2	3	4	5

B. Perspectives: Does the syllabus on the whole communicate openness to multiple perspectives and experiences, or is it mainly focused on one perspective?

One perspective					Multiple perspectives
	1	2	3	4	5

C. Student appeal: Does the course description/introduction appeal to a variety of students and perspectives or does it mainly target one type of student?

One type of student					Variety of students
	1	2	3	4	5

D. Accessible syllabus: How accessible is your syllabus as a document? (You may want to check [JMU’s ODS page](#) or the [Universal Design Validator at the Equity and Excellence in Higher Education](#) website to answer this question.)

Low level of accessibility					Accessible to all
	1	2	3	4	5

Learning Objectives

A. Clarity: Are the learning goals and objectives clearly stated or mainly implied?

Mainly implied

Clearly stated

1

2

3

4

5

B. Student interests: To what extent do the objectives appeal to a range or variety of student interests? Do the objectives appeal to and reflect the interests and learning needs of different types/groups of students? (Consider student differences related to socio-demographic factors, first generation status, ability, sexual orientation etc.)

Appeal to one
type of student

Appeal to a
range of
students

1

2

3

4

5

C. Learning domains: To what extent do the learning objectives appeal to the head, heart, and hand? In other words, do they cover cognitive, affective, and psycho-motor domains?

Objectives
belong to one
domain

Objectives cover
various domains

1

2

3

4

5

D. Levels: To what extent do the cognitive learning objectives appeal to different levels/types of thinking? (Summary, evaluation, application, analysis, synthesis, etc.)

One level

Multiple levels

1

2

3

4

5

E. Diversity: To what extent do some of the learning objectives aim at diversity- or inclusion-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes?

No
diversity-related
objectives

All objectives
relate to
diversity

1

2

3

4

5

Assessment

A. Variety: To what extent does the course employ a variety of assignments? Do the students have a variety of ways to show what they know? Or does the course rely on only few types of assignment?

One type of
assignment

Several types of
assignment

1

2

3

4

5

B. Formative assessment: Is there a variety of formative assessments (assignments) that provide students with immediate feedback and opportunities to improve?

No formative
assessment

Many formative
assessments

1

2

3

4

5

C. Alignment: To what extent do the assessments measure student knowledge and skills that are taught in the class and correspond to learning objectives, or do they measure extraneous knowledge and skills?

Assessments test
extraneous
knowledge/skills

Assessments
align with
objectives and
teaching

1

2

3

4

5

D. Fixed and flexible options: Is divergent, creative thinking rewarded or do assessments require students to conform to one common norm?

Assessments
establish one
norm

Assessments
reward
creativity

1

2

3

4

5

Teaching and Learning Activities

A. Culturally responsive teaching: To what extent do teaching activities meet the needs of diverse learners, diverse learning styles, diverse ways of processing information, diverse performative styles? (Examples: Experiential learning, collaborative group work, individual activities, peer teaching/editing/sharing, one on one instructor time.)

Teaching requires one type of learning					Teaching supports diverse types of learning
1	2	3	4	5	

B. Flexibility/adaptation: How much flexibility is there in the course design to modify and adjust to meet the learning opportunities that arise in the moment in the classroom?

No flexibility					High level of flexibility
1	2	3	4	5	

C. Alignment: Are the teaching and learning activities aligned with the objectives? Or are they disconnected?

Activities do not align with objectives					Activities align with objectives
1	2	3	4	5	

D. Interaction patterns: Do learning activities promote inclusive interactive patterns? Do students cooperatively learn together? Or is instruction based on one-directional information provision by the instructor?

Teaching as information provision					Learning through inclusive interaction
1	2	3	4	5	

E. Shared teaching: Do students have shared responsibility in their (and their fellow students') learning? For example, do students lead discussion groups, reteach concepts, or otherwise contribute to the teaching?

Instructor alone
is responsible for
teaching

Students share
responsibility
for learning

1

2

3

4

5

F. Engagement: To what extent do you encourage students to interact with you and with each other?

I don't encourage
interaction

Encourage
interaction in a
variety of ways

1

2

3

4

5

Content

A: Perspectives: To what extent do the course materials, such as readings, provide a full spectrum of perspectives on topics?

The material presents one perspective

1

2

3

4

The material presents a wide variety of perspectives

5

B. Voice: To what extent does the course material represent a variety of voices?

The material presents one voice

1

2

3

4

The material presents a wide variety of voices

5

C. Pace: To what extent does the pace of the course content allow for multiple processing speeds?

Content requires common pace

1

2

3

4

Content permits for multiple speeds

5

D. Course materials: To what extent does the format of the course material respond to a broad range of learning preferences (reading written text, visual and audio media preferences, etc.)?

One format

1

2

3

4

Multiple formats

5

E. Accessibility: To what extent is the course material accessible to all students, including those with disabilities? (For example, do visual media have subtitles, can online readings be recognized by screen readers, etc.)

The material is not accessible

1

2

3

4

All course materials are accessible

5

3. Inclusion and Subtext

In this section, write short responses to explore the implicit assumptions, rules, and requirements of your course..

Hidden Curriculum

A. Implicit rules: What formal and informal rules, assumptions, values are important for the course but not stated in the syllabus?

B. Implicit messages:What unwritten messages does the syllabus convey about the course, content, and learning? Is there a “hidden curriculum” embedded in the syllabus?

C. Hidden biases: In which ways does the “hidden curriculum” potentially discriminate against some students? (For example, do you use only one type of assessment to determine grades, and does the disadvantage some of the students in ways unrelated to their learning?)

D. Teaching philosophy: What is your teaching philosophy (student-centered learning, teacher-centered information dissemination, cooperative learning, etc.) and how does the syllabus communicate it to students? Do you clearly communicate your teaching philosophy to avoid biases?

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