LINK

Creating inclusive learning environments

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Introduction: Inclusive learning environments

The higher education classroom context, together with the curriculum and pedagogy, are central to achieving inclusion and closing the ethnicity awarding gap. This applies to both face-to-face and online settings. Unconscious bias, prejudice, cultural misconceptions, and racism exist within the learning and teaching context and can arise unexpectedly during sessions or can be proactively surfaced and explored, so that they can be recognised and challenged. Whilst critical conversations about these issues are essential for students to work effectively together, anxiety about raising them, and using appropriate language, can prevent inclusion and diversity topics being explored.

This thought-piece offers research-informed strategies for creating more inclusive learning environments that can provide a context for these conversations. Such environments facilitate open, respectful, non-judgemental discussions and can enable students and staff to explore sensitive and controversial issues. This thought-piece also describes a cards resource that can be used to support conversations about equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and make them more open and visible in higher education communities and other settings. Speaking about these issues should enable more confident discourse about such inequalities and how to dismantle them.

Contexts: Key educational debates and theories

The ethnicity awarding gap will be influenced by unconscious bias and racism in classrooms and in the institution (Agarwal, 2020). This has been shown to affect attainment in a range of ways including stereotyping which can lead to assumptions around behaviours and abilities and can affect the behaviour of staff and students (Steele, 2010). Staff may judge students based on unconscious bias, white students may fail to recognise their privilege and cultural dominance, while BAME students can be affected in terms of confidence (Steele, 2010).

Learning environments where some students feel they don't belong, lead to '…a heightened physiological response in the form of stress, which places additional load

on their cognitive resources and working memory…' (Agarwal, 2020:144). If they are to fulfil their academic potential students need safe learning spaces to develop critical thinking, use perspective taking and enhance awareness and understanding of different cultural influences and prejudices and their effects. They need to have opportunities to talk about these issues in a safe context where their views can be challenged and changed (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Language and its uses, different ways it can be understood, and the differing impacts it can have on people from different racial and cultural contexts need to be explored. Hidden assumptions need to be surfaced and ways of articulating and challenging these must be identified if classrooms are to be inclusive.

Appropriate exploration of these topics can enable all students to use active listening, perspective taking, empathy and strategies to deal with challenging perspectives e.g. RACE (reflect, ask, connect, and expand) (Campt, 2018). Talking about issues in relation to racism, prejudice and bias is challenging for staff and students but essential (Learning for Justice, 2022). Inclusive learning environments are designed to support staff and students in having these conversations.

Guidance on creating an inclusive learning environment

Creating a context which facilitates open, respectful, non-judgemental discussions will enable students and staff to explore sensitive and controversial topics in the classroom. Holley and Steiner (2005:50) suggest creating a safe space that 'allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors' and highlight that 'being safe is not the same as being comfortable'. Engaging in classroom activities may surface participants' own biases and challenge their personal values and beliefs, which can feel unsettling and requires courage to confront. Linguistically, a 'brave space' (Arao & Clemens, 2013:142) or a 'classroom of disagreements' (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019:284) rather than a 'safe space', may be preferable, to emphasise the challenging and transformational nature of discourse about equality and diversity. Introducing the 'micro-skills' of compassion in education can help students to develop an inclusive, tolerant attitude to their peers during difficult conversations, facilitating an empathic and non-judgemental environment, in which students are motivated to notice 'social or physical distress of others and the commitment to reduce or prevent that distress' (Gilbert, 2017:189).

Mutually agreed ground rules, with specific participant dispositions and behaviours, are recognised as promoting meaningful equality and diversity discourse (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Jackson, 2014; Harven & Soodjinda, 2016; Williams, Woodson & Wallace, 2016). Whilst agreeing such ground rules is an ethical prerequisite for situations in which conversations about EDI are started deliberately they can also be used more widely for establishing contexts that support positive learning experiences.

Suggested steps and ground rules

Ensure staff and facilitators have completed relevant organisational training in equality and diversity and unconscious bias to confront their own biased beliefs (Harven & Soodjinda, 2016).

Discuss, create, and agree ground rules within the group, to reinforce shared responsibility for creating a safe classroom context (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Jackson, 2014; Garibay, 2015).

Remind students that learning happens outside our comfort zones, and sometimes that requires tolerating personal discomfort, challenging ourselves, and taking risks (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Arao & Clemens, 2013; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019).

Inform participants how and where they can access wellbeing support if they are distressed by issues raised in the session (e.g. a tutor, counselling service, staff EAP, Student Wellbeing service).

Use compassion-based micro-skills activities to develop:

tolerance and respect for other peoples' experiences and viewpoints, even when we don't agree with them
students' abilities to facilitate a safe/brave space, encourage others to participate and try not to judge other people or make assumptions (Gilbert, ND; Gilbert, 2017).

Promote active listening skills to deepen understanding of what others are saying, demonstrate respect, and communicate authenticity and empathy to others (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015).

Jackson (2014) suggested several ground rules, which have been developed by students and teachers working together. These rules cover: the type of language to be used and the limits that apply (see No Hate Campaign); taking turns to speak and not interrupting others; showing respect 'for the right of others to express views and beliefs different from one's own'; challenging ideas not individuals; encouraging participants to explain why they hold particular views; and making sure everyone can take part (Jackson, 2014:57).

The equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) cards resource

The EDI cards resource for facilitating conversations and learning includes a set of cards and a booklet, which provides an introduction to the resource together with guidance on setting the context for using the cards and ideas for ways of using them. The resource was created by the University of Hertfordshire School of Education Student Success and Engagement Team: Abigail Anjorin, Amanda Clark, Annita Clarke, Nusrat Khan and Hannah Luxford working with students and an illustrator, Joel Cooper. The booklet was designed by Julia Hodgkinson.

This resource builds on the experience of developing and researching the use of cards to explore disciplinary learning processes (Jarvis & Clark, 2020) and provides a conduit for conversation and a visual prompt for exploring EDI issues. Resources which can be used as games can encourage participation, reflection, and transformational thinking (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). The Student Success and Engagement Team in the School of Education used this playful approach to tackle talking about more sensitive issues. They worked with students to develop a set of EDI cards as part of a University Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre funded project. The pack consists of 18 cards with words and visual metaphors depicting concepts that were identified as important, and difficult, to explore (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The pack of 18 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion cards

The cards are square, to represent equality, use a restricted colour palette as they are abstract and not representing any particular group, and have an easy to read font. They can be used as hard copies or distributed as digital versions thereby providing a flexible resource for face-to-face and online use.

The accompanying booklet is designed to support group facilitators using the cards to develop approaches suitable for their settings. An effective context will foster deeper thinking and exploration which is more likely to lead to understanding, learning and change. The booklet also includes some suggestions for using the cards with individuals and groups, as a starting point for identifying ways of using the cards in different settings. Information about other resources for facilitators are given at the end of the booklet.

The equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) cards resource can be accessed from the following links: Booklet,Cards.

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