

Small World: Crafting an Inclusive Classroom (No Matter What You Teach)

by Mary A. Armstrong

I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I am going to begin this essay by making some gigantic assumptions about you. I am going to assume that you feel strongly that students learn best when they are truly visible, respected, and safe, and that you want them to be prepared to thrive in a world that is complexly diverse. Further, I am going to assume you not only want these things for "students" in the abstract, but you want them for *your* students, and that you want your teaching and your classroom to be positive forces that help empower your students, sustain diversity on your campus, and foster greater readiness for this global century.

Still with me? If you are, you already know that the elusive goal of "diversity in higher education" is of deep concern for many of us—particularly those of us who strive to be attentive to our teaching and/or to social justice issues. Over the course of my career thus far—which has included more than a decade of heading Women's and Gender Studies Programs, as well as work on numerous diversity committees and task forces, climate assessment projects, and campus climate initiatives—I have watched as diversity and inclusivity have become core watchwords for educational quality. We now seem to agree, as educators, that fostering and sustaining inclusivity on our campuses is important, indeed crucial, for both

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student success and institutional excellence. There can be no doubt that inclusivity has become a principal value. But close on the heels of this now common (perhaps even sometimes too glib) consensus, there is some real conceptual disarray: What is “campus climate”? How do we measure it? How do we improve it? What does a welcoming climate or a truly inclusive classroom look like? How can we promote diversity across the curriculum? When we seek to advance diversity, what it is that are we attempting to encourage and sustain?

At least one thing seems clear: we need to carefully parse out the many aspects of the inclusivity we seek to promote, simply because the work of creating and sus-

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taining a truly inclusive institution and a healthy campus climate is so complex. At most institutions it involves (at least) matters of admissions, retention, conversion, financial aid, student life, population demographics, politics (local, state and/or institutional), leadership, fundraising, general education programs, classroom content, the shape of scholarship and research, varieties of (rewarded or ignored) pedagogies, and on and on. Many elements go into the creation of a sustainably diverse institution with a welcoming climate for all.

And although every one of these aspects of inclusivity deserve great care and serious attention, I want to concentrate here on just one of these many moving parts—specifically, the challenging and exhilarating matter of crafting an inclusive classroom. It is my contention that every single classroom—from Soil Science to Ethnic Studies, from First Year Writing to Physics—can function as an incubator for inclusivity, as a social experience that fosters a positive climate. And every classroom can do so regardless of whether or not the student population of that classroom itself is substantially diverse. Here are some thoughts on why—and how.

I. CLASS CONTENT AND CLASS CLIMATE: SOME DISTINCTIONS WORTH MAKING

When we try to imagine inclusivity and diversity intersecting with the classroom and pedagogy, many of us understandably think of interdisciplinary courses that offer, by definition, intellectual content that addresses issues of equity. So, for example, Native American Studies, Poverty Studies, or Women’s Studies might jump to mind as obvious institutional spaces where diversity and the classroom intersect. We might also think of courses that occur in traditional departments—

such as African-American Women Writers or Labor Movement History, for example—that also serve as fundamental contributors to student learning about diversity and difference. Additionally, we might think of the quality of diversity in the classroom as directly measured through the welfare of certain student populations at our institution: Do students of color thrive on our campus? Do we effectively serve economically disadvantaged students? Are LGBT students comfortable coming out?

However, while I am the first to assert and defend both the necessity of diversity-related academic programs and the great value of a (literally) diverse student

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body, I want to push back the starting point for thinking about how we might best promote “inclusivity in the classroom.” To put it bluntly, we frequently fail to distinguish inclusivity in course *content* and/or diversity in the student *population* from pedagogical inclusivity in the *classroom*. Or, put another way, we sometimes contend that if a course’s *content* is not in direct conversation with issues having to do with difference and social justice, then that course’s *classroom* is not a place where issues of inclusivity can be addressed or fostered. “My courses have nothing to do with diversity” is probably a sentence we have all heard (or perhaps even spoken ourselves) and it is often a sentence put forward as the “free pass” that discharges us from further responsibilities in the matter. After all, what could mathematics, or biomedical engineering, or agriculture management, have to do with diversity and inclusivity? Numbers are numbers, science is science, and facts are facts. Similarly, we might throw up our hands at the lack of diversity at our institution’s less-than-diverse *population*, forgetting that, as citizens of an institution, we always play a role in creating a culture that is welcoming (or not), regardless of our campus demographics. For one reason or another, it is not uncommon for many of us to claim that our particular concerns as instructors do not extend to the issue of who is sitting in those plastic seats.

But I want to argue that it does matter, and that perhaps it matters most when we think it matters least. While many *courses* do not (and many cannot) include content that directly addresses diversity, and many classes and institutions (regrettably) do not reflect a powerfully diverse student demographic, I contend that all *classrooms* can contribute to an inclusive climate. Classrooms are social environments, and all social environments are places where inclusivity happens—or fails to happen. In short, there is no getting off the hook: if you have students sitting in front of you, you are interacting with a social group. And if you are interacting

with a social group, you have a job to do regarding the practice of inclusivity.

Let's suppose then that all classrooms (regardless of class topic or course content or student population) are functioning microenvironments, pockets of atmosphere within the larger, more familiar context of "campus climate." These microenvironments of social interaction are sustained for a considerable period of time and, as the most powerful person in that environment, you're the meteorologist. In every class you teach, actively or passively, you're telling the inhabitants something about the conditions in which they are attempting to grow and thrive. Like it or not, your class is a small world. What kind of world would you like it to be?

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II: SOME PEOPLE DO THIS REALLY WELL —AND SO CAN YOU

There is plenty to be nervous about when it comes to envisioning your formerly "neutral" classroom as a swarm of complex human interactions where social issues are in motion, lessons about equity are being learned, and assumptions about ability or human value are being reinforced or challenged. If your academic discipline or your personal experience has not empowered you to confidently address this dynamic system, it can feel like the best advice is to shut your eyes and never think about it again because it is just too difficult, too sticky, and too risky to take into account. But many instructors actually do this kind of work well, and they do it well most of the time. Not just the Professors of Ethnic Studies and Global Studies, but lots of instructors in many different fields.

How is that possible? It is not that these instructors are necessarily gifted with some supernatural flair for human relations, or some mystical ability to interact with people in ways that empower them, or because they intuitively know how to make students "feel good." Rather, it is because such faculty *know how*—and the "how" is not necessarily about the content of their courses or even their own identities. Rather, they have learned how to do it—that is, they have gained knowledge of and become skilled at deploying pedagogical strategies for inclusivity within the complex social moment that is "the classroom." Put another way: there really is research on this stuff—serious, scholarly, substantive research—and there really are best practices. And there are instructors who make it their business to know the research and to try the best practices. We don't expect our students to start doing experiments in a chemistry lab without instruction, and we

don't imagine they can just begin painting in oils without some guidance. Why, then, do we persist in the expectation that faculty can, by sheer force of will and lots of good intentions, easily manage the complex work of promoting an equitable classroom climate without a little input, guidance, knowledge, and help from the experts?

Sometimes the answer to that question is that we are too busy debating about “political correctness” or imagined politics to absorb this simple fact: there are things we can learn that will help us understand the learning process better and there are skills we can acquire that will make our classrooms more inclusive

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(indeed, I sometimes suspect that “political correctness” is one of the most distracting and useless terms that has emerged in the last decades). The scholarly work on inclusivity in teaching and learning, and on creating a welcoming classroom climate, is vast. And yet—even in places where teaching is highly valued and inclusivity is sincerely prized—it is quite possible to spend an entire career at an institution that “values diversity” and never encounter research on inclusivity or have the opportunity to be trained in the best practices. And, ironically enough, I believe this lack of opportunity is often most prevalent for instructors in disciplines that are not typically associated with inclusivity work, disciplines which are often the exact places where a more welcoming climate could do the most good in promoting diversity and facilitating broader student success.

So, should you really wish to re-imagine your teaching as a site for inclusivity, hit the books. Here are just a few excellent cross-disciplinary (though hardly exhaustive) examples of how self-education will make you a better educator. If you are into pedagogical theory and want to start deep, consider Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a classic from the late 1960s that imagines students not as empty vessels to be filled with facts but as participants in the creation of knowledge; Freire's work posits that all intellectual growth takes place in a active relationship among teacher, student, and the society in which learning takes place. Or fast forward to psychologist Claude Steele's 2010 *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*. Steele's extremely influential work on the concept of “stereotype threat” demonstrates how that phenomenon can undermine academic performance. (If you are not familiar with the concept of “stereotype threat,” in which an individual's performance is affected by anxieties that s/he will conform to a negative stereotype about the group to which s/he belongs, start reading!)

Another brilliant resource is Derald Wing Sue's *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, also from 2010. Sue's work offers an extremely powerful analysis of how unintended, careless slights and inadvertent social cues take massive tolls on people from underrepresented groups, affecting both their academic performance and their psychological well-being. And classics such as Gail B. Griffin's *Calling: Essays on Teaching in the Mother Tongue* (1992) and Beverly Daniel Tatum's *"Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?": A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity* (1997) invite us to consider targeted, practical ways to re-think pedagogy as a social act of inclu-

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sivity as well as an act of instruction. And finally, should your inclinations lean towards the sciences, spend some time reading *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, a collaborative publication from the National Research Council. This remarkable book will convince you that "learning is social" and that opportunities for (and the quality of) interaction in the classroom—any classroom—strongly drives the successful learning experience.

Pick a vantage point—pedagogy theory, the social sciences, the humanities, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, interdisciplinarity—and there is thoughtful, data-driven work to help you teach not only more inclusively, but also more effectively.

III: WARM IT UP: A FEW USEFUL APPROACHES

Before you race to the library and spend a few weeks inside, there are (happily) some simple common practices that are available to everyone before they have the chance to sit down to read a mountain of books. If you're at the climate controls of your small world, there are easy ways to signal temperate weather. Here are some ways you might try to make your classroom environment a more clement one:

- **Close the Barn Door—Now.** Elsewhere, I have called this "creating a pre-crisis classroom" (Armstrong 11-12). The basic principle is that every teacher can be *proactive* in demonstrating values around inclusivity and that such behavior both sets a tone and prevents future problems. Proactivity may take the form of syllabi statements that require respectful behavior. Or a proactive stance may be apparent in rules for project work, which can discuss avoiding stereotyped behavior (for example, pointing out that men typically report for the group, but women

typically act as note takers). The principle here is that you beat trouble to the punch: *you* bring inclusivity up of your own accord and you actively signal that it matters.

- **Pick It Up and Carry It:** If you want your classroom to be inclusive, then include! Make an effort. If your class is of a manageable size, learn how to pronounce names correctly. If, for example, some names are of Hispanic or Asian origin and you don't know the associated languages, figure it out. You're a college professor. You can handle it. Or learn where the international student who assists you in your research lab is from—and if you are ignorant about her home country, then

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edify yourself. If you don't know when this year's Islamic Holy Days begin, or when the Jewish Holy Days are, then learn. It's not rocket science—and hey, you're bright enough to be a rocket scientist anyway.

- **Work to Surrender Your “Privilege of Unknowing”:** Theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined this phrase to indicate how power has the luxury of not-seeing what surrounds it (Sedgwick 123). For example, if you say to your students “So, when you and your spouse fill out a joint federal tax return...,” you have just erased many lesbian and gay students in your class. Take into account that experiences you may carelessly cite as universal are not necessarily shared, but rather vary greatly with economic opportunity, social privilege, and cultural context. Unless you learn to divest yourself of the habit of not-seeing certain students, you will never know the unintended effects you are having. But students feel those effects—and Adrienne Rich beautifully summarizes the results:

When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you ...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (Rich 199)

- **Home is Where the Comfort Zone Is:** Somewhere out there, whatever your discipline, there is a valuable conversation about teaching in a more inclusive way. And it is a conversation worth seeking out, because many people feel more comfortable learning about inclusivity on their own turf. Disciplines have powerful social cultures, as well as intellectual cultures (ever noticed that Mechanical Engineering Departments and English Departments often “feel” a little different as social spaces?). Naming and understanding the characteristics of your own world *as a culture*, and learning how that specific culture may impact the experi-

ence of your (different) students, can help you include all students better. And, once you've spent some time looking at the same old world with brand new eyes, you may even find that the course material that once seemed so completely neutral to you is not quite as disinterested and unbiased as you once thought.

- **Ask For Feedback:** Feeling gutsy? Consider taking a poll at the end of the semester—informal and anonymous, with absolutely no demographic information collected at all, and with only a very few questions. Ask students how they have experienced the climate in your course. Your focus will depend on the make-up of the class, and your institution, and so on, but you will be surprised at what you can

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find out. It is possible and often worthwhile to ask students, too, if they feel the climate of the department, or of the school itself, is welcoming and (if not) what might help. There is much to be learned from students about the climate for learning—and it is surprising how rarely we ask them.

- **Accept Discomfort:** We get very, very used to doing things a certain way, and we get very, very comfortable with those ways. And so do the people around us. If you don't believe me, try changing things just a little. For example, if your area of expertise has been a traditionally male domain, try using only feminine pronouns in your examples. Or, if your students are mainly American citizens, set the contexts you cite outside of the United States. It won't take long before people notice, which means you will quickly have a choice: go back to everyday usages and continue to enforce all the implied norms, or stay a little odd. It's not always an easy choice. But being more inclusive sometimes requires an ability to live with a little awkwardness.

- **Don't Get Self-Indulgent:** It can be tempting to turn the challenge of building an inclusive classroom into an exercise in your own cleverness. For example, it can feel easier to plunge into the debates about the male and female brains and their capacities for math than it is to start taking risks in the classroom and simply being more inclusive of your female students. And it can feel safer to spend time reading about the cultural reasons why certain racial or ethnic groups do (not) gravitate towards your field than to think about how unexamined assumptions about race may torque your very own classroom dynamics (have you ever assumed, without a hint of evidence, that a Black male student in your class was an athlete?). Educate yourself, but don't indulge yourself. While knowledge about diversity and inclusivity is very important, endless abstract debate will have only one certain effect: it will distract you from attempting to more directly include all your students.

IV. OUT THE DOOR AND DOWN THE HALL

I have argued in this essay that the classroom is a small world. And I believe that to be true. But I also know that every one of these small worlds is embedded in the larger cosmos of the institution. And it is this not-always-obvious connection—between the seemingly isolated, closed-door world of the individual classroom and the college or university where it is located—that comprises a critical component of crafting an inclusive classroom. Knowing what goes on *outside* actually can affect (and sometimes powerfully support) the work of trying to create and sustain an inclusive space *inside*.

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For example, take a moment to brush up on your institution's policies and priorities for diversity. Is there a diversity statement? Should it go on your syllabus, perhaps? And, if there is a statement, is it inclusive or are some underrepresented groups left off? What messages about diversity and inclusivity are the students hearing and bringing with them into your classroom? Those are messages well worth your hearing, too. Additionally, it is valuable to learn from the student affairs professionals that work on your campus and who labor extraordinarily hard to make student life safe, rewarding, and substantive. Student affairs staff often have a uniquely insightful perspective about the climate in which students study and interact, as do student leaders. It is a meaningful and useful undertaking for us to get in the habit of talking to people who can help us, as instructors, think more clearly about the whole student within the larger context of the institution—its culture, its various atmospheres, its public spaces.


And of course, we are part of those public spaces. Though it sometimes feels like home for many of us, our offices are spaces of great significance for climate. Offices are places where we work (office hours, meetings with our research students), but also semi-personal places where many of us show the more human side of ourselves (that Mets poster, your wedding picture, photos from excursions you have taken with groups of students). Take a moment to consider the work space you create and think about who would feel welcome there, and who might not. A second look at the atmosphere we create for our students is worthwhile: who is represented? who is missing?

And finally, it is imperative to remember that while the universe outside your door might very much want your small world to be inclusive, that same universe is unlikely to come to you with offers of assistance. Therefore, ask. Ask for workshops on inclusive teaching from your Center for Teaching and Learning. Ask

your department chair to bring in a speaker on developing pedagogies of inclusivity in your field. Ask your colleagues if they would like to join a reading group on building skills for handling diversity in the classroom. Ask your Dean to sponsor a panel featuring the most successfully inclusive instructors at your institution. If your institution values positive classroom climate, it should be willing to help you in your quest—and it should value and reward your efforts on its behalf.

V. NEVER ASSUME

At the beginning of this essay I made some assumptions about you, and so it only seems right to conclude with a few more serious words on that topic. There is something about assumptions that lies at the very heart of what we teach *against*, no matter what we teach. Assumptions allow for the substitution of guesses for facts, of unthinking suppositions for data, and of convenience and habit for more difficult models. Whether actively or passively done, assumption-making frequently lies at the heart of bad science, bad art, and bad relationships. It obscures what is often very necessary, and it over-magnifies what is sometimes useless or just patently wrong.

Fighting our own assumptions—about our students, about what we can or cannot foster in our classrooms, about where and how diversity can thrive—is one of the keys to true inclusivity in higher education. Do not assume that there is nothing you can do to foster diversity because your courses do not remotely touch on issues of difference, race, class, poverty, gender, disability, or any specific content addressing privilege or disenfranchisement. Do not assume you cannot make a difference because your classroom does not typically have a diverse student population. Possibilities for creating an inclusive classroom are there for every instructor, and we need only search them out, learn about them, and explore ways to mobilize them. If we choose to, we can learn to see what we thought didn't matter, prioritize what once seemed merely tangential, and open our minds to the possibility that the classrooms in which we work are more filled with chances for making a difference than we ever supposed. Moving beyond what seems possible or obvious is what we demand of our students. It is the very least we can do for them. 

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