

***Inclusivity and diversity in learning environments***

1. What do you see as the greatest challenges in creating inclusive learning environments that welcome students from diverse backgrounds and identities?

The greatest challenge would probably have to be checking our own preconceived notions at the door. Giving all students a clean slate upon which to begin and not judging them based on gender or cultural diversity (our focus for this question). For example, while statistically most K-5 teachers are female, that does not mean that a male student does not have valuable contributions to make in regards to discussions about these students.

Another concern would be that how you treat your students does not come across as favoritism to some and condescending to others as the case described in Ambrose (2010) with the female engineers. Flexibility in assignment due dates for Jewish students during Fall semesters, for example, they may need extensions to be able to meet their religious obligations and their educational responsibilities, but to other students this may come across as favoritism if the same extensions are not granted to them.

We also have to be careful with assumptions, just because a student looks Hispanic for example, does not mean that he identifies with the culture, or is a spokesperson or authority over all concerns of Hispanic traditions, it doesn't even mean he speaks the language, so watch trying to make a connection by saying something in Spanish or even the way you pronounce their name. It is certainly a delicate balance with student interactions so that all students feel welcomed, valued, and respected.

2. What strategies and ideas do you think are most promising for creating inclusive learning environments that welcome a diverse student group and support the learning of each person?

I believe that by educating ourselves about such things as eye contact, participation and motivation as seen in Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) we can begin to make better informed decisions about our expectations regarding students that are culturally different than we are. I would also like to think that by being respectful about things such as eye contact and questions raised in class, one could also have a conversation about things that are done in the American culture which are considered necessary. For example, if a culturally diverse student is not comfortable questioning people in positions of "power" a teacher candidate has to learn how to communicate with parents, because although ultimately that parent does have control over their student, the teacher does have to communicate effectively with these parents during conferences or meetings. They also have to learn how to communicate with colleagues and their principal or they may get railroaded because of their seemingly lack of

participation or interaction, their perceptions of who deserves what type of respect because of their status can work against them. (I could be over thinking it, but I know from experience, that sometimes personality traits can work against you, being shy for example can come across like you don't care). I think there has to be a delicate balance between how people are treated but there also needs to be some acculturation in regards to where you plan on excelling as a professional person.

### **Addressing behavioral challenges**

1. Which strategies seem most useful to you? Why?

The most effective strategy in my opinion came across in Bain (2004) where Jeanette Norden is quoted, "I will do everything possible to help you learn...but you must decide if you want to engage in this experience...there are some things you must resolve to do to make it worthwhile for you and others in the group" (p. 139). This strategy of showing our students our investment in their learning is very powerful. This particular statement spoke profoundly to me because the commitment is two-fold from the instructor and the student. I feel that it puts the ball in the students' court. That is to say, "you have to help me help you I can't do it alone or for you." It lets the student know that you are there for them but they have to do their part. There is an implied shift of power or control over their learning.

Another strategy having to do with a shift in power in the classroom came across in Weimer (2002) on page 35 there is a discussion about wrong answers counting for just as much credit as correct answers. If we want our students to participate in class discussions and to volunteer to talk things through, we have to allow them a safe atmosphere in which to make mistakes, to be challenged by their peers, and to field questions from them, this allows for everyone not only to engage in participation, but to practice thinking about their thinking without the fear of being ridiculed, and without fear of losing "points". This would also link to motivation and participation, if they feel secure about not losing credibility then there is nothing to lose by participating.

2. How will you handle situations where there are disruptive, rude or disrespectful learners?

It is interesting that we are approaching these topics so early in the semester because they seem to be applying to me very directly. I currently have a student that shared on the first day that he was in the class because he "had to be" in order to jump through a hoop that the University imposed upon him. My initial reaction was "here we go..." He continued to make a few comments about the content and about teachers in general, and once he did that I felt I needed to address him directly and nip this in the bud. I walked over to him and put my back to the other students and said, "While I can respect your feelings about the class, about teachers and any other opinions you may have, you also have to be careful with *your* comments. The majority of the people in here are going to be teachers and they are able to make connections to the content that you may not see as valuable because of your particular interests, but it is valuable to them and their interests. If you need to vent about your feelings please come see me

privately.” He proceeded to nod his head indicating understanding and has really not had any more outbursts, but has not come to see me either.

While doing the readings one thing that struck me was that some of these students act this way because of fear (Weimer, 2002, p.151). I never considered that fear would play a role in this kind of environment. It could be that I have been in this kind of environment for so long that it did not occur to me that for some or most it is their first exposure and they have to adjust. In regards to the above student, because he has already shared that math “is not his thing” this kind of environment could be causing more anxiety because he will be relying on his teammates and himself rather than have me give them what they need to know, his level of self-confidence could be low. Reading not to take it personally really helped me shift my perspective as well, because I did walk out of there feeling defeated a few times and feeling badly for my other students as well. It will be interesting to see how he progresses (how we all progress) and what future challenges he will present for me. I hope I am ready!