

# How Fellow Instructors Create an Inclusive Classroom Experience



For more tips on fostering inclusion and diversity  
in the classroom, visit [Today's Learner](#)



“Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.”

**Vernā Myers**

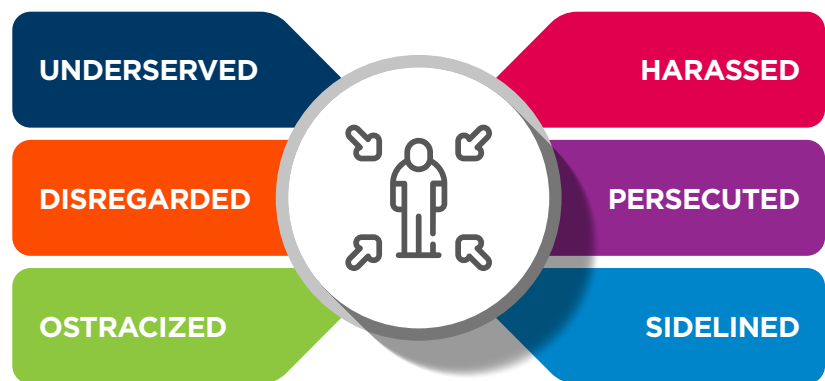
VP, Inclusion Strategy  
at Netflix

## With a thoughtful approach, your classroom can be a welcoming, relevant and engaging place to learn

Instructors know their students' personal struggles can greatly affect their performance—and want to do more to help. While the culture of higher education is widely thought to be open-minded and conducive to fostering growth and well-being, students belonging to historically marginalized groups may face unique challenges in a college experience typically built around that of students from more privileged groups.

What do we mean by “marginalized?”

[Charter for Compassion](#) says definitions for “marginalized” include:



For example: groups such as immigrants, women and girls, individuals with mental or physical disabilities, the LGBTQIA+ community and people who face racial and class-based disparities are marginalized.

On the contrary, “[privileged](#)” groups consist of populations—the most common examples being white, male, heterosexual and able-bodied—who historically enjoy unearned access to resources (social power) that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership.

[When it comes to the classroom experience](#), just one of many examples includes student affairs professionals, who rely on identity development theories to interpret student behavior. Within developmental theories, far less attention has been demonstrated toward differences such as sex, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion and their effect on the developmental process.



# Create a Sense of Belonging

## Course Content

Researcher Dante Dixon has found that young [people from marginalized groups don't always see role models in the media](#) who look like them. While his research pertains to youth, his role as Professor of Educational Psychology at Michigan State University has helped educators understand how hope influences minority students in terms of better engagement and curiosity—as well as higher academic achievement.

Dixon's work to turn hope into a tangible concept includes showing minority students pictures of people he describes in an interview with UC Berkeley's *Greater Good Magazine* as “[those] we don't generally expect to be successful.” He then shares the (fake) low GPAs of these individuals and asks for students to draw conclusions about them based on these factors. Lastly, he shows these young people pictures of their successes, such as becoming a Cardiac Surgeon or creating a startup with multimillion-dollar revenue, illustrating to marginalized youth that people who look like them can do well in life.



Marginalized students in your course have enrolled and earned acceptance into your institution. By showing them the perspectives and works of successful individuals they can identify with, you're continuing to provide relevance to their interests and perspectives.

## Faculty Give Tips on Inclusive Course Materials

A common thread in our discussions with faculty demonstrates that it's ideal to deliver diverse content using a variety of sources, such as video, text readings, film, podcasts and any other way to creatively convey content.



“Help students make connections with the content through something they know or are interested in.”

—**Professor Beth Ryan**, Columbia College Chicago



“Expose students to minority-owned publicly traded companies with a financial statement analysis project. Discuss Wall Street's connection to slavery.”

—**Professor Parnella Baul**, Monroe County Community College



**“Diversity** is the range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical ability or attributes, religious or ethical values system, national origin, and political beliefs.

**Inclusion** is involvement and empowerment, where the inherent worth and dignity of all people are recognized. An inclusive university promotes and sustains a sense of belonging; it values and practices respect for the talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of living of its members.”

**Ferris State University**





"Include diverse content, materials, and ideas using different textbooks, sources and assignments."

"I've gotten great ideas from my affiliation with the [National Center for Women and IT](#) that can be applied in any classroom."

—**Professor Sandy Keeter**, Seminole State College of Florida



"[Discuss] local history. Knowing what happened in your community helps you understand what is happening."

—**Professor Sherri Singer**, Alamance Community College



"[Help students] learn about their communities. Discuss how inclusivity is based on many factors besides race."

—**Professor Anitre Bell**, Community College of Beaver County

## Classroom Exercises

Classroom exercises are an integral way to engage students as individuals as well as members of a larger community. Depending on the exercise, instructors can connect personally with students or encourage students to connect with one another.

## Individual Exercises

According to the Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University, [getting to know students as individuals](#) encourages a sense of belonging—which increases cross-cultural interaction. For students, it's also been found to increase participation, motivation for the class and a positive perception of the instructor.



One exercise the institution recommends is to have students fill out a confidential background questionnaire asking them information about themselves such as:

- ✓ Name
- ✓ Pronouns
- ✓ Previous experience with the topic(s) of the class
- ✓ What they're hoping to learn
- ✓ An additional field with an option to enter anything else they'd like the professor to know about them

In particular, Carnegie Mellon University found that this exercise positively affected international students' performance, adding that this exercise helped instructors even in large lecture classes get to know more students.



## Group Exercises

According to Iris Bohnet, Academic Dean at the Harvard Kennedy School and author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, forming groups can be useful in a variety of situations. For instance, in her Social Psychology class, she has found that **intergroup contact** is one of the best ways to decrease racial bias.

Using Bohnet's research, instructors can make the most out of assigning group exercises by avoiding tokenism—or, being seen to represent their group as a whole—with critical mass: a benchmark calling for one-third or three members of a group to be from marginalized groups.

Why critical mass? In her book, Bohnet identifies a “girl effect” where girls may benefit from same-sex classrooms, but boys also benefit from classrooms with more girls in them (page 224).

However, when groups are tokenized—for example, in scenarios where only one girl is assigned to work with a group of boys—Bohnet notes that these effects may not persist. Critical mass brings the benefit of diversity while preventing marginalized individuals from being seen to represent their group as a whole.

### Faculty Give Tips on Classroom Exercises



“For online classes, have smaller discussion groups within a discussion so students feel their voice is heard.”

- ✓ “Use break out rooms if teaching synchronously and assign case scenarios, chapter questions or problems to solve. Have students [take] turns sharing the group's work in [the larger] group.
- ✓ Use digital collaboration tools and have students self-select group roles.
- ✓ Ask students to bring content examples and ‘teach back’ in pairs and small groups.”

—**Professor Beth Ryan**, Columbia College Chicago



“Encourage faculty-student interaction by use of recorded videos and video conferencing software, as well as student-to-student interaction through discussion boards, etc.”

—**Professor Melinda Doty**, East Carolina University



**Intergroup contact**  
is one of the best ways to decrease racial bias.

**1/3 or three members**  
of a group should be from marginalized groups.



Team's  
psychological  
safety



More effective  
learning



## Classroom Culture

In *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, Bohnet also cites **social sensitivity** (page 266) as a way for groups to practice equal distributions of power. In a classroom setting, that looks like giving marginalized students a platform to make their voices heard, harnessing the collective power of the students and creating a socially sensitive culture in your classroom.

### Encourage Students—Even Hesitant Ones—to Speak Up

In her research, Organizational Behavioral Scientist Amy Edmonson of Harvard University discovered that [a team's psychological safety](#) is associated with more effective learning. While her work sheds light on fostering psychological safety in the workplace, these methods are adaptable for the classroom.

Some characteristics of psychological safety include:



#### Empathy

caring about the thoughts and feelings of other students.

#### HOW:

Use check-ins and deep listening to support students.



#### Authentic, vulnerable interactions

being understanding about mistakes and giving others space to be themselves.

#### HOW:

Show genuine interest in students when they speak and avoid judging them.



#### Amplifying diverse voices

calling on students from marginalized groups and pausing to allow new voices to speak.

#### HOW:

Advocate for their professional advancement and leadership opportunities.

The positive effects of psychological safety allow for students to raise questions, concerns and ideas without fear of personal repercussions—and it can easily be implemented in various course formats.



For online courses in particular, Professor Edmonson offers tips that can be used in [online meeting platforms](#) such as Zoom.

The following functions can lower hurdles to engagement:



hand-raising



polls



chat



breakout  
rooms

Instructors can take it a step further by interacting with quiet students before and after class.



## Create Safe Spaces

Professor Kyesha Jennings, English and Literature Instructor at Danville Community College, says [students should engage with racially sensitive topics in productive ways](#) (page 9). She recommends that the first step is embracing uncomfortable conversations and challenging the status quo, “stomping on eggshells rather than walking on eggshells.”



To do this productively, Professor Jennings says students must feel supported and safe—and be able to define their safe space. Her directions for students include:

- ✓ Define the word *safe*. In your own words, what does it mean to be *safe*?
- ✓ Define the word *space*. What is it? What does it look like?
- ✓ Have a conversation with your surrounding peers about your definitions.
- ✓ After you have actively engaged in conversation, together, develop a definition for *safe space*. (What does it feel like? What are the requirements for you to feel safe in a particular space? What are the rules in this space?)
- ✓ Identify when you have felt comfortable sharing your ideas and questions in a class. What happened in those moments to help you feel comfortable?
- ✓ Identify when you have had ideas or questions but have not shared them. Why not?

According to Professor Jennings, identities and experiences brought by students and instructors alike should not be ignored. It's when students and instructors embrace differences that the learning experience enables progressive, respectful dialogue.

## Manage Microaggressions

[Microaggressions are subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination](#) (page 10), such as assuming Asian-American students are better at Math or expecting a queer-identified student to be the voice for all LGBTQIA+ students.

Similar to Professor Jennings' strategy for creating safe spaces, Asst. Professors of Social Work Gayle Mallinger and Jay Gabbard of Western Kentucky University share that managing microaggressions can be done by facilitating **difficult dialogue in a supportive culture**.



Instructors can define respectful communication within syllabi, as well as definitions of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination. A “word watch” can also be used to enable students to identify various terms used in common conversation that are considered microaggressions, which can be kept in a list in the classroom or Slack channel.

These activities can encourage students to become more comfortable identifying and confronting subtle biases, while being more mindful about avoiding them. Instructors can benefit from garnering feedback on the efficacy of these tactics, as well as staying aware of their own biases.



“[Stomp] on eggshells rather than [walk] on eggshells.”

**Professor  
Kyesha Jennings**



# Do the Work to Stay Inclusive










Strategies for fostering inclusivity are constantly evolving, and it's best to stay on top of social issues and the unique personal struggles affecting the marginalized members of your classroom. Being aware of where your privilege lies and avoiding color-blindness—or, the incorrect belief that we are in a post-racial world while failing to acknowledge the very real struggles students face—can give you the right mindset to continually better your inclusive teaching approach.




For more tips on fostering inclusion and diversity in the classroom, visit [Today's Learner](#).

## Teaching for All the Ways Students Learn

Professor Ryan fosters inclusivity in her course by referencing Howard Gardner's [Theory of Multiple Intelligences](#). This theory goes beyond just visual and auditory learning to incorporate nine approaches toward human learning potential, which are:

 <b>Verbal-linguistic intelligence</b>	 <b>Logical-mathematical intelligence</b>	 <b>Spatial-visual intelligence</b>
 <b>Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence</b>	 <b>Musical intelligence</b>	 <b>Interpersonal intelligence</b>
 <b>Intrapersonal intelligence</b>	 <b>Naturalist intelligence</b>	 <b>Existential intelligence</b>



Professor Ryan recommends incorporating many ways of delivering content to reach the multiple intelligences that fill your classroom.

[Growth Mindset](#) is the idea that everyone can learn and be successful. Encouraging this mindset, which champions eagerness to face challenges, comfort with admitting lack of knowledge about a topic, persistence and allowing oneself to be inspired by successful people, is a key step for reaching vulnerable students—and a strategy used by Professor Keeter to foster inclusivity.

For all students, particularly students who benefit most from inclusive classroom practices, Professor Keeter also recommends striving for equal access to education. This can include flexible [office hours](#) and tutoring options.

