7STEPS
WITH
PLYMOUTH
UNIVERSITY

7 Steps to:
Adopting Culturally Inclusive Teaching Practices

Overview

The changing demographic of the student body in Higher Education today poses new challenges to traditional methods of teaching and learning. Notions of the 'non-traditional student' incorporate students belonging to diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

The differences in the academic performance of 'non-traditional students' have been of interest. National research suggests that students from ethnic minority backgrounds obtain poorer degree results than white students, even when controlling for prior attainment, age, gender, and discipline (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). Findings at Plymouth University also suggest that students from minority ethnic backgrounds attain lower degree classifications when compared to students from white ethnic backgrounds (Moon, 2008). A more recent study sought to investigate possible explanations for these differences in student attainment by comparing student experiences. Differences in attainment cannot be attributed to attendance or study time, but may be related to issues such as adapting to a different academic culture and modes of assessment used in Higher Education (Cotton et al., 2010).

Until recently, the focus has been on remedial measures for diverse students. However, recent policy changes and an increased emphasis on equality have urged universities to revisit their pedagogical approaches, and engage more effectively with the learning needs of all students by adopting inclusive pedagogies. These practices are centred around valuing the contribution of students regardless of their backgrounds, avoiding stereotyping and appreciating the contributions of different value systems. Inclusive pedagogies benefit not just those from diverse backgrounds but all students, by drawing on the strengths of students from different cultural, national, and ethnic backgrounds.

1. Utilize the learning opportunities inherent in multicultural student backgrounds

Multicultural student classrooms can in themselves be used as sources of learning material. By encouraging students to draw from their own experiences, tutors can create student centred learning environments that contribute to collective learning. Case study material selected should reflect the diversity of the classroom and avoid bias and discrimination (Valli et al., 2009). The inclusive environment created will help increase student confidence and build intellectual identities, especially among those from diverse backgrounds (Singh, 2010).

Discuss with students specific meanings inherent in non-verbal communication to develop students' awareness of diverse communication contexts and their impacts. For example, students in Business Communication courses can be encouraged to share communication protocols with respect to their own cultures.

2. Encourage intercultural interaction and participation

Increasing structured opportunities to engage in inter-cultural interaction can help students recognise the value of working with people from diverse backgrounds. Discussion techniques designed to encourage participation (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005) could be used to help all students appreciate the commonalities as well as the diversity within their backgrounds.

Practical Pointer: Mixing up students from different backgrounds for group work can provide rich opportunities to help students understand the advantages and challenges of working in international contexts. Linking up such exercises with PDP processes can serve as an added incentive to encourage students to participate.

3. Evaluate assessments and feedback for inclusivity

Variations in assessment types and marking systems can be a source of anxiety for students from different academic cultures and can sometimes result in unintended cases of plagiarism. Prepare students by clarifying the goals of a piece of coursework and indicating what range of marks to expect (Valli et al., 2009). Feedback, when provided, should be written rather than verbal, with simple explanations and suggestions for improvement.

Instances of plagiarism may not always be a result of dishonesty and may result from an insufficient understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. Demonstrating examples of properly referenced answers can help students understand what to emulate.

References

Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T., (2007). *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment*, Department for Education and Skills Research Report RW92.: DfES

Brookfield, S. and Preskill, S., (2005). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Cotton, D.R.E., George, R., and Joyner, M. (2010). *The Attainment Gap Project: Final Report,* Plymouth: Plymouth University,

Hockings, C., Cooke, S. and Bowl, M. (2007). 'Academic engagement within a widening participation context – a 3D analysis', *Teaching in Higher Education,*12 (5-6), pp 721-733

Moon, I., (2008). *Ethnicity and Gender Gaps in Student Attainment,* Available at: http://staff.plymouth. ac.uk//equality/reports/intranet.htm (PU Staff only) (Accessed: 26 November 2013)

Plymouth University. (no date) Writing for Assignments E-library (WrAssE):[online] Available from: <http://www.learningdevelopment.plymouth. ac.uk/wrasse> [Accessed June 2010]

Plymouth University (2011). *Plymouth University Equality and Diversity Policy.* Available at: http:// www1.plymouth.ac.uk/equality/Pages/default.aspx (PU Staff only) (Accessed: 26 November 2013)

Valli, Y., Brown,S., and Race, P., 2009. *Cultural Inclusivity: A Guide for Leeds Met Staff. Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University*

Further Reading

Anglia Ruskin University., (2008). *Teach Inclusive.* [online] Available from: <http://web.anglia.ac.uk/ inclusive_practice/index.html> [Accessed January 2010]

Archer, W., Jones, E., and Davison, J., (2010). *A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience.* UK Higher Education International Unit, Research Series/6. London: UKHE International Unit

Carnegie Mellon (no date) *Recognising and Addressing Cultural Variations in the Classroom.* Available at: http://www.cmu.edu/academic-integrity/preventing/culturalvariations.pdf (Accessed 26 November 2013) Plymouth University (2013). *Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience Strategy 2013-2020.* Plymouth: Plymouth University

Plymouth University, (2010). *Cultural Inclusivity, A guide for Plymouth University Staff:* Plymouth University

Surridge, P., (2007). *The National Student Survey 2006.* Report to HEFCE. University of Bristol: HEFCE

Turney, L., Law, I., and Phillips, D., (2002). *Institutional Racism in Higher Education. Building the Anti-Racist HEI: A Toolkit.* Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, Leeds: University of Leeds

Universities Scotland (do date) *Race Equality Toolkit: Learning and Teaching.* Available at: http://www. universities-scotland.ac.uk/raceequalitytoolkit/ (Accessed: 26 November 2013)

University of Wolverhampton (no date) *Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference.* Available at: http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default. aspx?page=14274 (Accessed 26 November 2013)

4. Utilise your pastoral role

Research suggests that students from diverse backgrounds don't want to be singled out but do want teachers to recognise their individual learning needs (Hockings *et al*., 2007). Tutors can utilise their personal tutor/pastoral roles to get to know students and respond to their needs better. Information about support services can be clearly and repeatedly communicated to students, while taking care not to target diverse students.

Take early action if you are concerned about a particular student. Ensure that students are aware of all available support sources, for both academic and pastoral issues.

5. Consider tutor and student expectations of coursework

Research suggests that there is a disconnect between staff and student perceptions of what constitutes a good assignment, especially for students from different academic backgrounds (Cotton *et al*., 2010). By communicating the qualities of a good assignment, some of these misconceptions could be cleared up.

Written instructions about what is expected from an assignment can be provided. Tutors can discuss and analyse examples of good assignments. The WrAssE e-library provides examples of student writing with staff comments (Plymouth University, no date supplied)

6. Minimise the use of jargon, idioms and colloquialisms

Using jargon, colloquial language and idioms can result in excluding students who are unfamiliar with UK contexts. The tutor's ability to engage in 'linguistic reformulation' (using discipline-specific terminology and immediately re-phrasing it in simpler language) is a key skill. The repetition and explanation of specialised terminology will help students understand and learn more effectively.

Idioms such as 'put on the back burner' could be explained and students asked to think up alternatives. This would help international students contribute while enhancing their learning. A glossary of specialist terms can be provided to students (Valli *et al*., 2009).

7. Be sensitive in language use and when referring to cultural stereotypes

Tutors must ensure that all learning material is non-discriminatory and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of all students. Where discriminatory material is used for a learning outcome, this must be made clear and the discriminatory nature of the material pointed out (Plymouth University, 2011).

Some forms of humour and the use swearing by tutors may be perceived as offensive by some students. Tutors should be aware that assuming a single norm as universal may exclude those with different belief systems.