Chapter 4

Inclusion, Reflection, and the Politics of Knowledge: On Working Toward the Realization of Inclusive Classroom Environments

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As a teacher and a social activist I cannot take an “objective” look at oppression and define it outside academic discourse. For me, multicultural teaching is about transforming the self, the classroom and ultimately the society; the places where oppression is real, lived and resisted. — Gail Dines, 1994

Struggles for inclusion have been a part of American higher education since its inception in the 17th century. At that time, higher education exclusively served the interests of a select group of elite men. The struggle then, just as today, has been to broaden access to higher education. Throughout history, rationales for greater inclusiveness have centered on various combinations of moral, demographic, civic, intellectual, and political imperatives (Border & Chism, 1992).

Today, rationales for inclusion primarily focus on the under-representation of people of color and are dominated by economic and demographic arguments (e.g., Hurtado, Milem, & Clayton-Pedersen, 1999; Rendón & Hope, 1996). Economic arguments revolve around the notion that populations historically excluded from higher education must be educated in order to strengthen the nation’s economy. In addition, all students need to be able to interact with diverse populations in order to participate in an increasingly global economy. Meanwhile, demographic arguments stem from the supposition that the presence of an increasingly diverse student body requires the creation of curricula and environments that reflect the current student body, and by extension, the diversity of the nation.

This chapter, which focuses on fostering inclusive classroom environments, is written from the perspective that inclusion is a critical component of an education through which students “develop independence in thought and action, …prepare…to be actors and not passive receptors of received ideas and notions, and…dare to dream about creating a more human and just social order” (Jackson & Solís, 1995, p. 7). We believe inclusion is about much more than access or marginal curricular changes. In fact, it is a realization that resides deeply in epistemological questions about who and what we are as a nation and as institutions of higher education and how we as educators, administrators,
and members of society, live our lives (Gabelnick, 1997). The type of inclusion we envision requires moving beyond valuing and celebrating difference to enabling transformative action. This action requires addressing issues at a structural level and refusing to engage in all too familiar, faddish, quick fix, surface-level solutions in response to “the challenges of diversity.” It is not diversity that is a challenge; “rather, the problem is directly related to the responses of the dominant culture to…[diversity]—responses that function to perpetuate social, political, and economic inequality” (Darder, 1997, p. 342). Hence, we view true inclusion as requiring the courage to confront higher education at the core, engaging the politics of knowledge and the historically defined structures that continue to privilege the elite at the expense of the masses.

Creating inclusive classrooms begins with recognizing that neither classrooms nor knowledge are apolitical (Hogue, Parker, & Miller, 1998). “While [all] knowledge and theories are generated from the standpoint of particular interests, location[s], and life experiences, we have been [erroneously] schooled to believe that knowledge is objective, neutral and separate from the knower” (Bensimon, 1994, p. 23). By recognizing this reality, we have the opportunity to begin creating and nurturing environments where multiple forms of knowledge, identities, locations, and ways of knowing hold credence. As a result, we provide students with validating experiences (Rendón, 1994) and with the skills to make sense of the world around them. These encounters with existing knowledge in inclusive environments allow students to create knowledge (Berry, 1998) and to become actors in shaping a shared future rather than recipients of a fragmented past.

As we engage in this work, it is important to recognize that this is not a process of implementing a predetermined recipe for teaching that somehow creates a liberatory and culturally democratic classroom environment (Darder, 1997; Freire, 1970/2000; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Rather, this process is shaped by the way in which we, as educators, engage the world in relationship to our own lives and the lives of our students. Regardless of the type of material we bring into the classroom, in the final analysis, impact is defined by the way we engage our students. Hence, “prior to any engagement with instrumental questions of practice, [we] must delve rigorously into those specific theoretical issues that are fundamental to the establishment of a culturally democratic foundation” (Darder, 1997, p. 331) and necessary for the creation of inclusive classrooms.

**Reflexivity**

The move toward inclusion can be exciting and fulfilling, but also difficult, painful, and frustrating. For some it is as though this work “attacks received wisdom, wrenches internalized values, and contests assumptions held so deeply that to challenge them feels as if one is fighting nature” (Freidman, 1995, p. 2). For others, it is both a joyous “act of resistance” and “complex, enigmatic, and even personally painful” (Wald, 1997, p.125), illustrating the need for deep personal work in moving toward greater multicultural awareness and inclusiveness. As Palmer (1998) suggests, “the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it” (p. 5). For indeed, “nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it happens in the images of our heads” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 109).

As a facilitator and instructor of multicultural education courses, Gorski (2000) writes about his experience undertaking a process of self-reflection concerning racial identity. In “Narrative on Whiteness and Multicultural Education,” he admits his failure, until recently, to examine multicultural issues introspectively:
This is the ultimate luxury of whiteness: the ability to see myself as neutral and thus excuse myself from any responsibility for addressing racial issues in education, society in general, and most importantly, myself. Even as a facilitator and instructor of Multicultural Education courses and workshops, I was able to avoid addressing my own issues by assuming either the role of advocate or the role of cultural theorist. Being was easier that way—succumbing to the pressure of academia, which, as an institution, is terrified of self-examination, and so discourages it through insisting on the scientific method and objectivity. (p. 2)

He goes on to say,

This experience reminded me that, while Multicultural Education is partially about addressing issues on a societal level or in the education system overall, my process for being a truly effective multicultural educator had to begin with a renewed dedication to address the “self” half of my responsibility duality. I had to immerse myself in a systematic process of examining how my experience as a White person informed my teaching and facilitating as well as the lenses through which I saw my students. (p. 3)

In other words, Gorski suggests the necessity of exploring the duality of identity, of exploring the self as an individual vis-à-vis the self as located within the structural context of society.

As we begin to take responsibility for the transformation of self, we must recognize that our beliefs and worldviews have been shaped through interactions and experiences in a society of unequal power relations. Unfortunately, our educational institutions mirror the same systems of power and oppression. As recipients of an education from these institutions, we have received erroneous information, distorted images, and incomplete histories of various groups. For instance, how many of us were ever taught that Iroquois Indians helped shape the origins of democracy in America or that Black feminists played a significant role in the American women’s movement? How many of us understand that race is socially constructed yet has very real political and cultural implications, or have ever considered America as a class-based society? The failure of educational institutions to provide a complete story renders our vision of the world inaccurate, making the histories and experiences of marginalized groups invisible. Furthermore, the reality is that most of us still live in segregated worlds and do not have the experience of a truly multicultural society. Therefore, we come to accept a dominant, universal standard that stands as the norm by which others are judged. Feminist scholar and writer bell hooks (1993) notes,

Most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teaching reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was a universal norm....Most of us learned to teach emulating this model. (p. 91)

Further, her own experience demonstrates how this universal standard is enacted and perpetuated in the classroom:

When I first entered the multicultural, multiethnic classroom setting, I was unprepared. I did not know how to cope effectively with so much “difference.” I had not really been compelled to work within an inclusive setting—one that is truly diverse—and I lacked the necessary skills. This is the case with most educators. It
is difficult for many educators in the United States to conceptualize how the classroom will look when they are confronted with the demographics, which indicate that “whiteness” may cease to be the norm ethnicity [sic] in the classroom settings on all levels. Hence, educators are poorly prepared when we actually confront diversity. This is why so many of us stubbornly cling to old patterns. (p. 94-95)

Unfortunately, we continue to be denied access to information that can mend our fragmented knowledge. The combination of deeply embedded, personal knowledge and the narrowness and partiality of information we receive creates a disconnect between what we actually know and what we believe we know. Furthermore, any realization that our knowledge is biased and inaccurate often leads to feelings of guilt, as we must face the fact that we have all been complicit in systems of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion. Listen to the voice of a White teacher whose experiences with one of his students causes him to confront his own racism:

I learned from Akmir’s reading techniques how to unlearn habits of mine that let such racism in books pass unexamined. Before knowing him, I was not attuned to many of the nuances of racist implication because I was not the victim of racism. I did not suffer through every offensive phrase I encountered when reading, nor did I experience rage when racism was cloaked in the authority of tradition or the language of excellence. The lack of that sensitivity bothered me, and I had to unlearn this insensitivity to biased yet traditional ways of speaking and writing. In addition, I had to learn now to choose my own language and learn to make the avoidance of racist reference habit. I had to think very carefully about talking about “dark intents” and “black deeds,” to avoid using comparisons like “civilized/primitive” and “sophisticated/unsophisticated,” and to eliminate characterizations like “disadvantaged” and “deprived.” I had to learn to think from the perspective of someone who had not learned racist language, and that experience has been an important part of my growth and development. Akmir’s insistence upon the details of racism reference influenced how I read, speak, and write in much the same way that current feminist writing is influencing me. For me it was a matter of unlearning what could be called habits of inclusion and exclusion. (Kohl, 1991, p. 32)

As educators and especially as researchers, we are often trained to believe that acquiring data on something equates with knowing. However, as the aforementioned narratives suggest, having information on societal groups does not mean that we understand the lived experiences of others. Instead, an understanding of lived experiences requires an investment of time and energy in dialogue with others and in understanding ourselves. Furthermore, this process also requires recognizing that as we come to know others, our knowing is different from the knowledge of those living within the context we seek to know, as we are situated outside that context (Darder, 1997).

Classroom Dynamics

By the very nature of the academy, we, as educators, hold power and authority in the classroom, and power differentials affect the way in which students interact, communicate, engage with the material, and challenge classroom presumptions. In addition, the power imbalance between faculty and students may be particularly pronounced in classrooms
where issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality are part of the discourse (Higginbotham, 1996). In understanding power in the classroom, the examination of our own positionality is an important piece when considering what influences classroom dynamics and students’ responses to engaging issues of diversity (Higginbotham, 1996). While this may mean different things for individual faculty members depending on group membership(s), the task at hand is to create a classroom environment where students feel safe struggling with difficult issues that challenge their assumptions and beliefs. As educators, we must be willing to share aspects of our own experiences and personal investment in the subject matter, particularly those issues that directly confront issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. As an example of this, Lipsitz (1997) articulates his commitment to the frequently challenging engagement of issues of social class in the classroom, saying:

I hope to show that identities of race and gender always intersect with class, that unlikely coalitions across identity categories have succeeded in the past, but only when people honestly acknowledged the things that divided them and created actual practices and structures of inclusion rather than just abstract calls for unity. (p. 20)

As students connect with us on various issues, they will feel more liberated to express their feelings and perspectives. Furthermore, students will realize that both faculty and their peers struggle with the complexity of social issues. This will not only restructure the power dynamics in the classroom, but will also help students develop their ideas and belief systems. Reflecting on her experience teaching diverse students, Vacarr (2001) offers the following perspective:

In the diverse classroom, many of us are unprepared for the discoveries that await us. It is our willingness to step out of the role of the Super Teacher, to reveal our own ignorance, and to engage our students in exploring transformative possibilities that invites the students to do the same. (p. 292)

One of the most challenging ways that students exercise power in the classroom is through resistance. While our instinct may be to ignore resistance, it is critical to recognize and address different manifestations of resistance in the classroom (Higginbotham, 1996). Whether students display resistance by being vocal, silent, or absent, it is important to treat all acts of resistance as a legitimate strategy in the process of learning. We cause the greatest harm when resistance is either ignored or challenged in a way that de-legitimizes the experience of the individual. As students engage in difficult and emotional topics, we must make an effort to create truly liberating classrooms where dissent is not viewed as negative, but is taken as an opportunity to learn from diverse perspectives. We should also be aware of the ways in which students’ own positionality and ways of knowing may cause resistance and influence their approach to learning new perspectives. Furthermore, we must establish environments where students do not try to avoid conflict and difference of opinion. It is exactly at the intersection of difference where the greatest amount of learning takes place, and opinions and attitudes change. Exemplifying this practice, McNaron (1997) describes how she, as an openly lesbian faculty member, engages students saying:

Teaching as a publicly declared lesbian scholar has allowed me tremendous opportunities to challenge lesbian or gay and also heterosexual students in my classes. I no longer worry about being surprised by students’ questions
regarding possibly coded homoerotic energy in literary works. In responding to them, I try to remember how terrified I was in the past so that I do not repress whatever it may be that motivates their discomfort. However, I also am unwilling to stop telling students the truth. (p. 34)

This narrative speaks to the need for us, as educators, to model for our students a practice of interrogating difference, welcoming conflict, and creating a dialogue of respect that is based in a sense of humanity. This is admittedly difficult, as most of us have been socialized in a way that makes us fearful of difference. This fear of difference makes it even more important that we model this behavior for students. Many of us, as well as our students, are told in childhood that if we do not have something nice to say about someone, then we should not say anything at all. As children who are curious about the differences we see, we are told not to gaze at others because the “oppositional gaze” is dangerous and discomforting. The White child looking at a Black man is told to stop staring. We silence our young and replace their natural and innocent questioning with fear and contempt. Furthermore, we accept the dominant cultural ways of being as the only ways to be. White, middle-class, male, heterosexual, able-bodied individuals establish the norm and everything in society conforms to that ideal. In our youth, we are socialized to accept this standard, unquestioningly. However, when students enter college, we hope for the interrogation and questioning that would help facilitate discussions about difference more freely. We ask them to relearn what they knew all along, and in the process of facilitating that learning, we find ourselves equally unprepared because, we too, have forgotten what it means to look honestly at a person who is different from ourselves and not feel guilty while we are “looking.”

Engaging Principles in Practice

As we have discussed in this chapter, the first realization of working to create inclusive classrooms, and ultimately an inclusive society, is that the work is both personally and professionally challenging. To engage in the work of creating inclusive classrooms, we must continually critique and interrogate ourselves, our scholarship, our pedagogy, and our curricula. What follows are some heuristic tools that we hope readers will find useful in seeking to create and re-create the meaning of inclusiveness in their classrooms.

As a continuous process, Figure 1 illustrates how this work is often embarked upon from multiple points of entry, such as through our scholarship, pedagogy, curricula, or exploration of self. While these entry points are varied, it is important to note that it is when we connect what we do externally with what we experience internally that the process of transformation begins. A dialectical relationship always exists between our work—no matter what the focus or emphasis—and who we are as human beings.

Thus, our work begins with a cognizance and recognition of who we are and where that situates us in society, in the institution where we teach, and in our classrooms (Cannon, 1990). For example, whether we are female, male, working class, upper class, Native American, White, Catholic, Muslim, gay, or straight, these pieces of our identities serve to situate us in society. Next, we must ask how our multiple identities shape our understanding of the world. How has our location within social and economic power relations across race, class, gender, and sexuality informed our worldview? These are questions that can also be asked of students as they engage in their own learning. As we begin to ask these questions and challenge our assumptions, we must consider whether our perspectives foster true inclusiveness and “interrupt the normal hierarchies of society” (Cannon, 1990, p. 126) or whether they merely serve to maintain the status quo.
In addition to the work on the self, pedagogy and the way we structure courses play a major role in whether classroom interactions mimic and reproduce our current social structure or whether they are environments that become truly inclusive (Cannon, 1990). Engaging this issue, Smyth (1992) posits some valuable questions that allow us to make explicit to ourselves, the assumptions underlying our pedagogical practices:

- What do my practices say about my assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching?
- Where did these ideas come from?
- What social practices are expressed in these ideas?
- What causes me to maintain my theories? What views of power do they embody?
- Whose interests seem to be served in my practices?
- What constrains my view of what is possible in teaching?

As the social structure of the classroom defines how power is distributed within the classroom, we must also consider who is in the classroom (in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics), how the classroom is organized physically, and how we fit into the power structure of the classroom. From this analysis, the most effective teaching strategies should be considered (Cannon, 1990).

Figure 1. The process of creating an inclusive classroom

[Diagram showing the process of creating an inclusive classroom with questions related to the self, pedagogy, and curriculum.]
Fundamental to effective pedagogy in an inclusive classroom are assumptions about teaching and learning and expectations of students. If we view our role as differentiating between students whom we perceive as having aptitude from those we perceive as not having aptitude, our classroom approach will focus on strategies for identifying students to encourage and students to discourage. If we believe that all students can learn, then our approach must be establishing conditions under which learning can take place. If we believe that in order to facilitate student success we must lower expectations, then we will see diversity and excellence as being in conflict. Contrary to this view, we know today that inclusiveness must be created in an environment with high expectations, belief in students’ capacity to succeed, and using supportive structures to facilitate learning. Using collaborative learning, peer groups, multiple strategies for teaching, and providing a supportive validating environment are all important elements in this process. As our pedagogy begins to change, further questions to consider throughout this process include assessing our own strengths and limitations in relation to new content and ways of engaging students (Schmitz, 1999). Moreover, we should begin to ask how we will handle difficult and controversial subjects in the classroom and how we will engage assessment of student learning in light of other changes we have implemented in our classrooms (Schmitz, 1999).

The third element for creating inclusive classrooms, following “self” and “pedagogy,” is the curriculum. What is contained in curricula is traditionally viewed as “truth” arrived at through objective scientific processes (Garcia & Smith, 1996). However, the truth is that no knowledge or curricula are apolitical, and much of what is used in curricula today is shaped by biases, omissions, and stereotypes (Garcia & Smith). Altering the curriculum is not simply a matter of adding a book or reading to an existing curriculum; nor is it a matter of adding materials so that students will more easily identify with the subject under study. We have to ask about the issues, methodologies, and content being taught and examine these areas from the perspective of educating a diverse group of students in the relevant subject matter. To begin the process of curriculum transformation, Schmitz (1999) offers a valuable set of questions. The questions she posits include:

- Have traditional ways of organizing content in this course obscured, distorted, or excluded certain ideas or groups?
- What new research is available that addresses past distortions and exclusions?
- How will the course change if I include this new research?
- How can I incorporate diverse voices without relying on students to speak for different groups?
- How might a change in this syllabus affect its relation to the rest of the curriculum?
- If the course topics remain the same, what new research, examples, and writings can illustrate these topics?
- How do I integrate new material so that it is not simply an “add-on”?

This process of critiquing our own values and beliefs and how they translate into the type of pedagogy and curriculum we employ, which in turn determines the type of classroom environment we create, is an ongoing process. Figure 2 seeks to capture this process, which speaks to who we are and how we live our lives, thus requiring that we continuously look inward and seek to better understand ourselves, ultimately allowing us to better understand others.
Indicators of Success

Although there is no prescribed formula for creating inclusive classrooms, the notion of inclusivity does not have to remain an elusive one. We are able to provide some “indicators of success” to serve as a guide on the journey toward inclusiveness. As evidence of progress, these indicators do not presuppose completion of one’s work; rather, they are meant to encourage continued growth. In addition, the following list is not meant to be exhaustive; instead, it provides some common characteristics that will be evidenced in the inclusive classroom.

- There is a balance of power and equity in the classroom evidenced by all students contributing to class discussions.
- Voices of dissent are not silenced. The classroom environment welcomes a spirit of questioning, critique, and interrogation.
- Students are encouraged to present new ideas and make suggestions with regard to diversifying course curriculum and content.
- A diversity of voices, perspectives, and scholarship are represented in course content and curriculum, and these perspectives are integrally connected to the learning goals and objectives of the course.
- Course material and content evoke emotional responses, as students find their assumptions of the world being challenged.
- Classroom discussions permit the expression of emotions and personal experiences. The classroom is not limited to “intellectual objectivity,” but instead is regarded as a space where students can deeply interrogate their own beliefs, assumptions, feelings, and experiences within the context of subject matter.
- Varied instructional styles are used to reflect different ways of learning.
• Students and faculty view conflict as an opportunity for learning, rather than a disruption to the learning process.
• Faculty are comfortable relinquishing their position of power and expertise in the classroom and acknowledge their own development in the process toward greater inclusiveness.

Finally, it is important to understand that there is no single definition of, or approach to, creating inclusive classrooms. Each individual enters the process from a different vantage point, and each class, characterized by a unique group of students and diverse subject matter, will require appropriate modifications. The inclusive classroom is not any one thing; it is a culmination of all things required of a more just society where education truly becomes “the practice of freedom.”

Conclusion

In offering a discussion of what we view as critical principles for fostering inclusiveness, we have sought to argue that creating inclusiveness in higher education requires grounding our work in a historically specific understanding of America, higher education, and the experiences of our students. We must understand the context and specificity of different experiences. We must be willing to challenge our own values, beliefs, and assumptions as we work to make sense of our world for ourselves and for our students. We must struggle with making our institution’s “webs of significance” explicit (Geertz, 1977) so that we have a more holistic perspective of reality. We must challenge the broken paradoxes of higher education—those separating the head from the heart, facts from feelings, theory from practice, and teaching from learning (Palmer, 1998). We must interrogate our own position within the classroom, our institutions, and the larger society. Lastly, we believe this work should be grounded in a commitment to social justice and a love for humanity, as the struggle to create inclusive institutions of higher education and indeed a more inclusive society continues.

Notes

1 As this chapter was authored collaboratively, the authors are listed in alphabetical order.
2 The phrase “oppositional gaze” is borrowed from bell hooks’ *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (1996), which describes the politicization of “looking” relations between Blacks and Whites.

References


