Cultural Diversity: Inclusive Teaching Practices in the Diverse Classroom

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"It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge"- Albert Einstein

The increased diversification of the student population in post-secondary institutions across Canada calls for a paradigm shift in approaches to teaching methodologies and learning techniques. In pursuit of creating an effective learning environment, teaching assistants (TAs) must be sensitized to the intellectual, cultural, and social needs of students. The new emerging reality begs the question, however: what does it mean to teach inclusively and how does this impact the mandate for TAs?

Culture in educational institutions reflects an ethic of caring and community. Diversity deals with the inherent differences among humans. It is known to include race, ethnicity, gender, language, age, religion, and so on. The diverse classroom can be a challenge for TAs. However, dealing with the challenges of cultural diversity in the classroom environment is manageable if TAs celebrate diversity, follow pedagogical strategies, and are transparent. This article will address some of the challenges and opportunities that the diverse classroom presents for TAs. It will also highlight possible changes TAs should consider to practice cultural diversity in classroom and teach inclusively.

It is a common practice in Canadian post-secondary institutions to engage graduate students as TAs. The instructor has the responsibility to orient TAs in practice of inclusive teaching approaches. TAs need to review and adjust their teaching techniques to be more responsive to the diverse classroom. Current research suggests that TAs should show genuine concern for each student by establishing sincere student-to-teacher relationships. They should present themselves as individuals first, rather than a teacher. They need to welcome students and appreciate their value. TAs should implement strategies such as creating an emotionally positive environment, which enables students to feel worthwhile and cared for, despite their cultural differences. Celebrating these diversities, TAs will be surprised how a student appreciate their concerns.

TAs should follow universal design based pedagogical strategies such as use simple language and avoid unnecessary complexity, encourage flexibility to allow students to choose their own methods for problem solving, and prepare presentations using different modes (e.g. pictorial, verbal, tactile) to convey information clearly to students (Ronald, 1997). The encouragement of flexibility in problem-solving techniques provides students an opportunity to express their creativity and identity. Furthermore, cooperative learning that helps students to know each other, reduce discrimination and prejudice, and unite them through human similarities (Friswell, T., Lovett, K., & Reed, M, 1995). Adopting such strategies will make students relax and stimulate better learning.

In the diverse classroom, accents or dialects can be a barrier to effective learning. This can be mitigated by using more visual tools such as graphs, charts, Power Point, presentations and so on. TAs associated with technical courses need to be aware of students' background on the technical terminologies such as the difference between imperial and metric units. A classroom observation scale (COS) - which consists of lesson preparation, in-class presentation, classroom management, understanding the level of student ability, non-academic interaction, and so on - helps the TAs to prepare for the inclusive classrooms (Jordan, A., Schwartz, E., and McGhieRichmond, D, 2009).

Moreover, expressing compassion, showing patience, using common sense, and facilitating open discussions are the significant indications of

transparency that allow TAs to foster a positive working environments.

Research implies that there is a need of social skill development among students in addition to the use of cultural and intellectual tools to make diverse classroom. That can be done devoting class time to adopt social skills (e.g., discovering local transit systems, coping with the cold Canadian climate, and so on) and community involvement such as field trips and interviews with local communities in order to reduce cultural tension among the students. The Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE, 2016) at Cornell University highlights the value of inclusive teaching strategies as follows:

Even though some of us might wish to conceptualize our classrooms as culturally neutral or might choose to ignore the cultural dimensions, students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door, nor can they instantly transcend their current level of development. [...] Therefore, it is important that the pedagogical strategies we employ in the classroom reflect an understanding of social identity development so that we can anticipate the tensions that might occur in the classroom and be proactive about them. (Ambrose et. al., 2010, pp 169-170)

The current reality demands more inclusive teaching practices to ensure greater access in post-secondary institutions. Rather than simply teaching the course curriculum, TAs need to focus on greater interaction with students to familiar with student's culture, adapt and promote pedagogical strategies, and be transparent. The adaptation of new tools reduce cultural tension among students and make changes teaching practice. The ultimate idea is motivating students, enhancing their work, inspiring them to think critically an issue from multiple perspectives. These approaches create opportunities to help manage the class room.

In spite of the perceived challenges confronting the TA, the diverse classroom presents unique opportunities. TAs can learn varying experiences dealing with the challenges of cultural diversity (e.g, employing pedagogical strategies, encouraging flexibility, respect, devote class time for social skill development, and so on), which, of course, should be the ultimate outcome of gaining a positive environment.

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