

Creating an Inclusive Classroom: Online and Crisis Edition

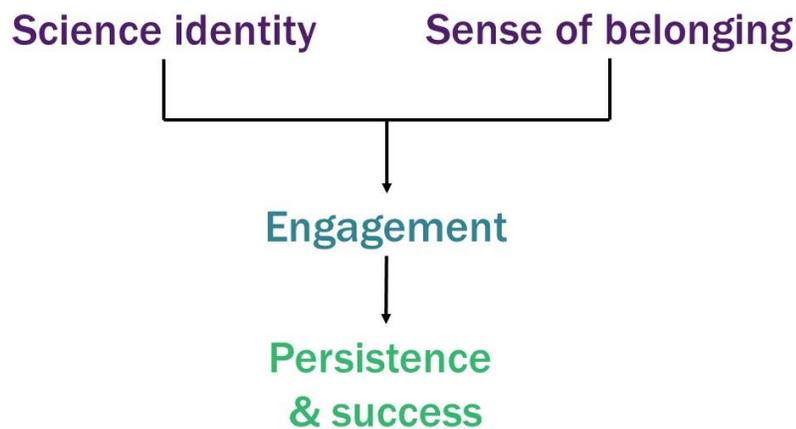
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The issue

The problem in a nutshell is that our discipline and department both lack diversity. This is true among grad students, and especially so at the faculty level. This not only hinders scientific progress and is also just fundamentally wrong. There is a plethora of reasons why this is the case. Today's talk we will focus on the recruitment aspect: how to get our undergrads more interested in EEB such that they may one day consider this as a career.

Here is a super simplified view of the proximate causes of persistence and success in STEM. The gist is that, to improve persistence and success for one group, we need to students to be engaged, and for that we need strategies to bolster their science identity and sense of belonging.



Schinske et al., 2015, CBE - Life Sciences Education
Wilson et al., 2015, Research in Higher Education

Just very briefly, science identity here refers here to a student's personal sense of identity and whether that matches up with the stereotypical "science identity", such as that portrayed on TV and social media, and also in the material we show students in our classrooms. Since this part here is really about what is being taught and that is quite out of your hands as TAs, we are going to focus on this other half here which you have full control over, and that is how to improve student's sense of belonging through creating an inclusive class space. This is important because students need to feel safe and comfortable being in a space before they feel ok enough to participate and engage with peers and the course material.

For a class like BIO 120 (and other classes with large enrollment), this space in the lab/tutorial classroom is extra critical for fostering that sense of belonging, because you, the TAs, are the primary, if not only, point of contact the students have with the teaching team. This makes you

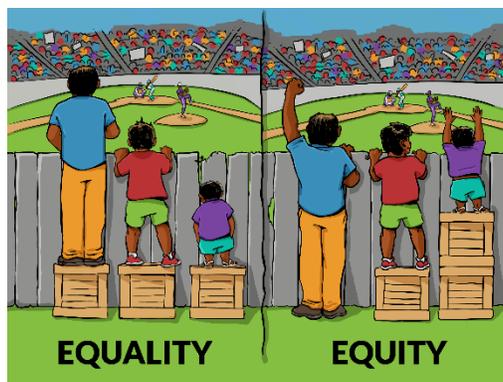
an important gate opener for these students as they consider EEB as a potential career destination. The precarious times we find ourselves in needs no reminder, we are all painfully aware of the world that is crumbling around us: pandemic, human rights crisis, and most recently, our continent is literally burning. We are all trying to live as normally as we can, and the goal here is to support and guide students so that they can do the best work that they can, given all the challenges they face. So how are we going to do this? How do we create and promote an inclusive classroom, online and during crises?

A pedagogy of kindness (Credit: Dr. Fiona Rawle, UTM Biology)

The crux of it is to have a pedagogy of kindness, and a theme that is going to come up over and over again is show your students that you care. This has always been true, but we need it now more than ever. I really like this quote from an anonymous twitter user as I think it captures this moment perfectly: this is here we are, all we have is our humanity.

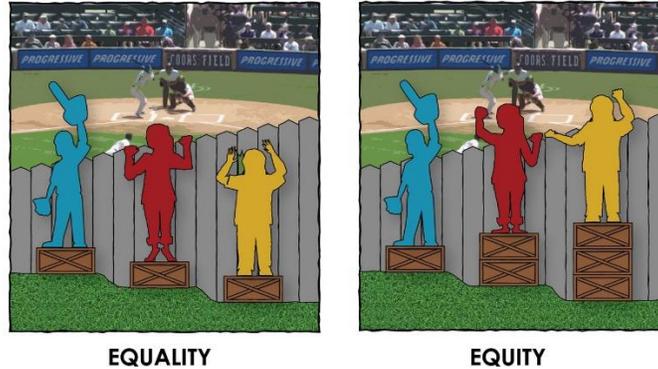
Before we get into specific strategies and things you can do, just want to mention a couple of things up front.

Firstly, kindness is NOT in conflict with rigor. Making accommodations such as granting an extension for an assignment does not mean that that submission will get graded any easier, least of all the student is getting some sort of freebie. But where did this mentality come from anyway?



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We've all seen figures like this, which are meant to illustrate how *equality* means to provide everybody with the same resource (one box to stand on) but that doesn't guarantee the same outcome (get to see the ball game). Alternatively, we should strive for *equity*, by providing people providing people with differing amounts of boxes to bring everybody to the same level. While whoever made these most certainly mean well, these figures also send a dangerous message: why are some people taller than others, implying a difference in inherent ability? No wonder some people push back on accessibility accommodations (extends to other things such as welfare programs), thinking (ERRONEOUSLY) it is giving people with "lower ability" (!?!?!?) a free pass.



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This is a much more accurate depiction of reality. Here we see everybody being of the same height, but the ground is not level, the fence isn't either, and those are the reasons why some people are struggling to see. Another great analogy is that even though we are in the same storm, we find ourselves on different boats, some are on a large cruise ship while others may be clinging on to a little raft. Having flexible policies, empathy, compassion, kindness, are all necessary to ensure that the playing ground is level, that our students are all given the same opportunity to achieve their goals.

Second, any apparent lack of engagement is NOT a signal that students are not interested. Students are interested enough to enroll in this course whilst their world is barely holding together. This is a challenging time for everyone. If students are struggling to show attentiveness, ask questions rather than make assumptions about their actions and punish them for the perceived lack of engagement. We are educators, not here to police anything. Ask for engagement in any which way people can.

Lastly, this pedagogy of kindness extends to us all. We are also human, and we are also in this storm, on our own boats, trying to find our balance. Take care of yourself. I cannot stress these enough: working until exhaustion is NOT a badge of honor, burnouts do NOT make you stronger, they leave you scarred, your burnout will serve NO ONE. The best thing you can do for your students is therefore to take care of yourself, so that you can be there for them, because they will need you. Set realistic expectations for yourself, for your students, and for each other. This semester will not be perfect, and it will be ok. Do not be afraid to set boundaries, e.g., tell your students that you will not answer emails on weekends. We are going to talk about a bunch of things you can do to help students feel welcomed and included in your classroom. Do them to the best of your ability but don't sweat it too much. Again, we are all just trying our best here.

Infusing kindness into your space

This section is broken down to stuffs you may be considering doing before, during, and after class. The key point being that showing that you care is an essential component to student engagement.

Before class:

- Send a welcome email before class start to introduce yourself. The course instructor may have already done this, but it will be worth to have another one coming from you, that is more personalized, and will help you connect with your students.
 - In addition to introducing yourself, you can include diversity and/or wellness statements in your email, to acknowledge that your students are human and to recognize the challenges that they face. You may also wish to include a short survey to get a sense of where everybody is at, or include some health and wellness resources.
- Familiarize yourself with the technology you are using. Even though most of us are pretty tech savvy, the online teaching platforms are not the necessarily the most intuitive software, and they may be extra difficult to navigate when you are in session and have to deal with a bunch of other things simultaneously. If you can, take some time to gather a group of friends (or fellow TAs) and test out all of the functions before you start to teach.
- Familiarize yourself with institutional resources for supporting students in distress. Not that we need to be social workers, counselors, or therapists, but we are a valuable connect in a student's circle of support, and we can help them navigate the system.

During class:

- Introduce the space, i.e., how the software works. Take a couple of minutes to show students where all the buttons are and what they do.
- Lay out ground rules for the virtual session.
 - Mention what you will do if someone isn't behaving appropriately, for instance, that you will mute them, or kick them out of the session. Tell students what their options are if anything happens and impacts them negatively, for instance, they can talk to you in private, talk to the course instructor, or contact the [Anti-racism and Cultural Diversity Office](#).
 - If your session is recorded, remind students of that, and especially that their faces and voices will be recorded as well.
 - Unless absolutely necessary, don't forced your students to turn on their cameras. It is invasive, and it is not equitable. Not everybody feels safe or want to show you their personal space. It might not even be their personal space, as there might be others who they are sharing that space with. You students may not have access to a webcam. It is certainly difficult for you to teach in this situation: it is strange to talk to a wall of black boxes, and you also won't be able to read students' reactions to gauge their

progress. A few strategies to mitigate this include taking frequent pauses to check in with students, keep an eye on the chat as best as you can, and encourage students to upload a photo of themselves or of their avatar like bitmoji so that there is at least something for you to look at.

- Help your students trust you. The key here is to be proactive. Be proactive in problem solving, and in reaching out to all of your students, not only the ones you perceive to be struggling. Encourage your students to check in with you regularly. Be positive but don't sugar coat everything too much, because it will be challenging, but challenges foster growth, and you are here to help.
- Solicit feedback often, either officially through course mechanisms or unofficially through a simple anonymous survey. You can ask about your teaching style (what is working and what is not work) and also about life.
- Use of inclusive and accurate language can foster a student's sense of belonging, especially when what we teach relate to their identities.
 - If a student tells you their preferred pronoun, and/or that their preferred name is not the same as the one listed on the roster, please respect that.
 - Err on the side of caution with content warnings. You might feel awkward to have to say these things, or try to convince yourself that probably there aren't any students with xyz condition in your class, but you can't know that (we are not allowed to ask students about their health condition unless they choose to disclose to you). A lot of disabilities and illness and life circumstances are invisible. One survey of US college students found that around 20% of students identify as having an invisible disability (Snyder et al., 2019). It is definitely better to err on the side of caution than causing harm and breaking trust with our students. The more you and the rest of us say these things the more normal and less weird it will become, and it really is so little effort to do with potentially very large returns.
 - Check out the fabulous resources compiled by [Project Biodiversify](#) for details on how to use inclusive and accurate language when discussing various topics in EEB.
 - Example: An instructor who is over excited when talking about certain health conditions might come across as insensitive and should take care to acknowledge that these conditions are connected to actual human lives. Avoid using stigmatizing terms such as abnormal, mutant, diseased, instead, opt for more neutral terms such as affected, variant, condition.
- Use breakout rooms and anonymous polls to build momentum for discussion rather than trying to manage a whole group discussion from the get go. The key here is start with low-stake tasks/activities, then building onto longer, higher stake activities. Give the groups a meaningful question/activity/problem, and have them report back to the class, or ask if anyone want to comment on how they answered a poll.

- Be yourself, otherwise it can be quite dry, and this is a good way to help build community. Try to show yourself (e.g., your personalities and identities) as much as you are comfortable with (e.g., talk about your own journey in research).

After class:

- Exit survey. Ask your students again how they found the course, and how they are doing now compared with the beginning of the semester.
- Offer to stay connected as a mentor if you are up for it. Many of us probably have this experience, that a great mentor early on in our career lifted us and helped us get to where we are now. Now is your chance to pay it forward and help somebody else out – to the extent you are comfortable with and capable with. You can make a difference :)

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