

SETTING UP AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Research shows that diversity makes us smarter. Designing an inclusive classroom that allows students to share differing opinions in a brave space where people are treated with dignity can result in good learning outcomes for all. Conflict is a natural part of learning, and differences of opinion expressed in appropriate ways allow everyone to grow. An inclusive classroom allows the instructor to manage conflict in a way that harnesses differences so that they serve as learning opportunities for all.

Here are some key elements to consider when designing an inclusive classroom.

- 1 Dialogue:** Introduce concepts of dialogue and share with students that you are inviting them into a space where dialogue (as opposed to debate) is encouraged. Challenging students to listen actively, share constructively and think critically is often more productive than searching for one right answer. Using dialogic methodology balances power in the room, seeks to increase understanding across difference and adds to the common pool of knowledge. (See “Dialogue” handout # 5)
- 2 Listening:** Explicitly teaching students how to practice active listening techniques can have life-long benefits. Rather than listening just long enough to respond, encourage students to listen generously and lead with curiosity. Asking good questions will result in far more learning than our cultural habit of frequent self-involved interjections.
- 3 Learning Edges:** Share with students that real learning is often messy and we learn when we make mistakes and experience discomfort. Invite them to bravely view discomfort as opportunities to extend their knowledge.
- 4 Hot Buttons:** Helping students understand what may press their buttons and elicit discomfort and inviting to pre-think ways to respond constructively in those moments of discomfort in the classroom can help individuals and a class collectively respect one another and move toward dialogue.
- 5 Group Norms:** Developing classroom guidelines collectively and referring to them frequently can help students remember the rules that they collaboratively agreed upon when things get tense. Be sure to include, “Don’t freeze people in time,” – which gives participants the opportunity to take risks (which is what learning is about), make mistakes and not be “frozen” there in perpetuity. Ensuring that students “expect/accept discomfort” also normalizes the experience and reminds them that it is through challenge that we learn and grow.
- 6 Community:** Spending time in the classroom with ice-breakers and assignments (like a testimonial assignment) help students get to know one another and view one another as worthy of being treated with respect during discussions on topics that challenge ways of knowing, values, beliefs, and perspectives.



BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

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The Tips for Building Inclusive Communities Series was designed to address questions from faculty, staff, students, and community members about how to create inclusive spaces in classrooms, meetings, on study abroad, in community settings and beyond. Every Tip in the series is designed to share basic details about different methods for creating inclusive communities in a way that is quickly accessible to the reader.

BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES is a university-wide initiative that reflects Michigan State University's core value of inclusion and its rich history in supporting the efforts of every student to realize their full potential through academic pursuit. Students, alumni, faculty, and staff carry this message forward, on campus and across the globe to help build inclusive communities where diversity and differences are acknowledged as strengths.

It is the mission of the Office for Inclusive Excellence and Impact to promote Building Inclusive Communities so that our differences will be acknowledged as our strength, so that we can be different together, and that our many voices sound together to form one will. The need to embrace and share this message has never been greater.

Why Build Inclusive Communities? When we participate in the process of Building Inclusive Communities we create the opportunity to see the world differently, in our research, in the work we pursue, in the classroom, in social relationships, as consumers, voters, partners, families, travelers, and more. Building Inclusive Communities starts with a frame of mind and a deep-seated understanding that inclusion is at the core of MSU's values and the very foundation of our life-long educational journey. But results don't occur overnight. It takes time and commitment to sustain. Together we will create a supportive and welcoming environment for all Spartans.

