



Knowing who your students are, as a group and as individuals, is an important part of good teaching. In recent years, higher education in general, and USC in particular, have become increasingly diverse. The variety of students is far greater, and their needs are very different, than in the past.

This module will consider how to teach effectively in an environment of diverse learners. If you wish to facilitate the learning process of students with a variety of backgrounds and needs, the following points are important:

- ▲ *Treat all students as individuals with unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs rather than as generalized representatives of particular racial, ethnic or cultural groups.*
- ▲ *Employ a variety of teaching styles to respond to the needs of diverse learners.*
- ▲ *Create an open classroom that values the experiences and perspectives of all students.*

Diversity: In Higher Education and at USC

Colleges and universities have become, in recent years, increasingly diverse institutions. Van Note Chisom (1999) identifies the following trends to illustrate this point:

- Older students (those outside of the traditional 17- to 22-year-old age range) now make up more than half of student population in higher education.
- Nationally, women account for 54 percent of bachelor's degree students.
- The presence of minority students is growing, led by Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans.
- Gay, lesbian and bisexual students are becoming more vocal about their presence and their needs.
- Students with learning or physical disabilities are being identified more frequently.

These national trends are reflected in the diversity of USC as well. Consider the following statistics on the 1999-2000 undergraduate population:

- 51 percent male, 49 percent female;
- 60 percent receive some form of financial aid;
- European Americans compose only 47 percent of the population; Hispanics/Latinos compose 14 percent, African Americans 6 percent, Asians 24 percent, and American Indians/Alaskan Natives 1 percent;
- 28 percent of the undergraduate degree students are international students.

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What these facts and figures show is that learners come to us with many different experiences, many different ways of seeing the world, and many different learning needs. Teaching in such an environment can be challenging. But if you understand yourself and your students, it also can be very rewarding.

Learning Styles in a Diverse Classroom

Eddy (1999) describes a learning style as the way in which we prefer to organize, classify and assimilate information about the environment. That is, how do we like to learn?

There is a great deal written on learning styles – and probably as many theories as there are writers on the subject. However, in their most basic form, there are three main learning styles (Eddy):

- ▲ Auditory learners prefer to receive ideas and information by hearing them. These students may struggle with reading and writing, but excel at memorizing spoken words such as song lyrics. They often benefit from discussion-based classes and the opportunity to give oral presentations.
- ▲ Visual learners prefer to receive information by seeing it. Typically these students pay much attention to detail. They are less likely to speak in class than their auditory peers, and generally use few words when they do. Outlines, graphs, maps and pictures are useful in helping these students learn.
- ▲ Kinesthetic-Tactile learners tend to learn best via movement and touch. These students are often labeled “hyperactive” because they tend to move around a great deal. Because they like movement, they may take many notes and learn best when allowed to explore and experience their environment.

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It is important to note that the various styles are those preferred by learners. If we looked at complete descriptions of each style, we would probably see some of ourselves in each. But we could also probably identify our dominant style. The fact that we learn in many ways is further justification for utilizing variety of teaching approaches is so important.

Understanding learning styles can help you create more inclusive classrooms where everyone has a chance to succeed. For instance, a student from a culture that teaches children to listen quietly in a classroom (or a visual learner who is uncomfortable with speaking) can be at a disadvantage when a portion of the grade is based on participation in class. Sensitive teachers can allow for group work during class to create smaller, safer environments for these students to speak and for their classroom performance to be evaluated.

✓ TIPS FOR...

Understanding Diverse Students

Students from different cultures, backgrounds and educational environments learn in distinctly different ways. Be aware that the way you learned best might not be the way that other students will learn -- or that all students learn in the manner(s) you did. For more information on specific differences in student learning and development, a number of fine summaries of different ways students learn and develop during their collegiate experiences are available, including Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Moore, 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991.

Students' Special Needs

Some students will have unique challenges that make learning in a traditional classroom difficult. Examples include visual or hearing impairments, Attention Deficit Disorder, mobility challenges, chronic illness (such as that brought about by chemotherapy), and learning disabilities.

There are many possible accommodations that help to create a productive learning environment for these students. It may be necessary for a student with a hearing impairment to have an interpreter present, for instance. A student with a chronic illness may need you to be flexible about the due dates for assignments.

Below are suggestions to consider when you work with students with special needs:

- Even though two students may have the same disability, their needs for accommodation may be quite different. Treat each student as an individual.
- Keep in mind that disabilities are not always visible to us. You are not required to assess a student's health; you should accept authorized documentation concerning an individual student's needs.
- Using many modes (written, verbal, video/slide, etc.) to present information is one way to help some learners with special needs learn more effectively.

It is important to remember that you are not responsible for identifying the disability or deciding on the accommodations. The Office of Disability Services and Programs (DSP) at USC provides students with a letter authenticating their needs, and the students should be able to present this letter to you upon request. DSP will help you identify and make the necessary accommodations.

If the student is not able to provide you with this documentation, you should politely explain that, before you can make the accommodations, the student needs to have registered with DSP. You will then work with DSP to determine the accommodations.

Tips on Teaching in a Diverse Classroom

Our students are diverse in their cultures and ethnicity, their experiences, their learning styles, and many other dimensions. And all of these dimensions shape who they are and how they learn. Effective teachers understand this and use a variety of teaching methods to promote student learning. Below are some basic tips on how to teach effectively in a diverse learning environment:

- Having a "color-blind" classroom is probably neither possible nor a good idea. Trying to do so inevitably privileges a particular perspective (usually that of the teacher) and fails to recognize the experiences and needs of the learners. It is preferable to use strategies that recognize and capitalize on this diversity.
- Appreciating the individuality of each student is important. While generalizations sensitize us to important differences between groups, each individual student has unique values, perspectives, experiences and needs.
- Articulate early in the course that you are committed to meeting the needs of all students and that you are open to conversations about how to help them learn.

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- As teachers, it is important that we recognize our own learning styles and cultural assumptions, because these styles and assumptions influence how we teach and what we expect from our students. Being aware of them allows us to develop a more inclusive teaching style.
- As you plan your course, and each class, prepare multiple examples to illustrate your points. Try to have these examples reflect different cultures, experiences, sexual orientations, genders, etc., to include all students in learning.
- Help students move between abstract, theoretical knowledge and concrete, specific experiences, to expand everyone's learning.
- Use different teaching methods (lectures, small groups, discussions, collaborative learning) to meet the variety of learning needs.

Sources

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