Strategies to Build a Community of Learners

I belong

"The need to be known by name is deeply rooted within all of us. One of the most excluding factors, mentioned time and again by students interviewed … was the fact that teachers and other class members did not know their names."

Griffiths S. 2010 *Teaching for Inclusion in Higher Education: A Guide to Practice*. Higher Education Academy, United Kingdom and All Ireland Society for Higher Education p.41

Facilitate a safe learning environment for your students

Set up and define values, objectives and ground rules for behaviour within the class:

- Define your role with your student group as a facilitator.

- Negotiate a class agreement which emphasises the importance of encouraging different points of view, interpretations, values and attitudes.

- Refer to the University's Student Charter. www.rmit.edu.au/about/studentcharter

Encourage student participation:

- Set up pair/small group work, for example, regular 3-minute talks, 3-minute brainstorms on topics.

- Make use of Personal Response Systems (PRS) including dedicated handheld units (clickers) and/or internet connected mobile devices (Smartphone etc.) in large classes to find out what students know and get feedback. www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/technology/prs

- Make sure participation is voluntary rather than singling out individual students or putting anyone 'on the spot'.

A Diversity of Learners

Implement strategies to deal with challenging topics or 'heated' moments:

- Remind students about the ground rules for behaviour by referring back to the class agreement.

- Let students know that you reserve the right to intervene in response to any behaviour that could be considered prejudiced, biased or discriminatory in nature.

- Model how to use 'evidence' based discussion in debates rather than just providing an opinion.

- Promote turn-taking when discussing controversial issues.

Seek feedback from students on how the class is being managed or managing itself:

- Ask for informal feedback regularly as part of a class activity.

Get to know your students

Learn and use students' names:

- Introduce yourself to the class.

- Learn something unique about each student where possible.

- Use a variety of activities to get to know student names.

Ensure you are approachable and friendly to students when they ask for help:

- Use plain English in your oral and written communication.

- Allow time at the end of each session for students to ask questions (this may also reduce the need for individual correspondence).

Ensure you are explicit about your availability, along with contact details and expected response times to emails:

- Put your contact details, 'office hours' and expected response times on PowerPoint, BlackBoard and as part of your email signature.

Communicate regularly with students:

- Create friendly, online spaces where students and staff can interact, for example, e-mail, blogs, wikis and social networks.

Ask students about their educational experiences and future aspirations:

- Ask a group question, or pair/small group work at the beginning of semester to find out the intended direction(s) of students.

- Review the above question regularly so that teachers and students can respond to changes in direction.

Value difference in your students

Be mindful not to make assumptions about students:

- Get to know your students as individuals with multiple identities.

- Employ strategies to address a range of student learning styles and needs including language competence, socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, prior educational experience or achievement.

Value difference:

- Create opportunities for students to present their own perspectives and worldview.

- Use resources which represent a broad range of perspectives.

Use language that recognises your students come from diverse backgrounds:

- If readings, websites or texts use stereotypical language cite the date the material was written, point out these shortcomings and give students an opportunity to discuss them (Gross, Davis, 2009).

Treat all students equally:

- Maintain high expectations of all your students.
- Avoid undervaluing or overvaluing comments from students whose first language is not English.

Build confidence in your students

Have high expectations of all your students:

- Tell students at the beginning of semester, and before each activity and assessment task what you expect of them in terms of participation, standards and deadlines.

Listen attentively:

- Listen to individual students as well as well as the group (double or multiple listening).

Respond thoughtfully:

- Pay attention to both individual learner and group learner needs.
- Use positive language in your responses.
- Know why you are responding, for example, to assist a student to find meaning, to integrate new learning with previous knowledge, or to analyse a concept.

Facilitate opportunities for your students to get to know their peers

Create both informal and formal opportunities for students to get to know each other:

- Use ice breaker activities in the first session.
- Encourage buddy or mentor systems.
- Link up students from different year groups to work on projects.
- Set up ample opportunities for group work.
- Create friendly on-line spaces.

Support students to access peer tutoring programs:

- Study and Learning Centre (SLC) Mentor training: The Study and Learning Centre (SLC) student mentor training program is for students who participate in academic mentoring programs across RMIT.
- Contact your College ADG for more information on peer mentoring and tutoring opportunities. Find out about peer tutoring and mentoring programs in your College.