

Inclusive Spaces

Teaching Remotely: Shared Experiences

Summary of virtual panel event held on July 23rd, 2020
[Link to video]



There is a growing need to consider equitable, inclusive and diverse spaces to support the holistic growth of students from various backgrounds and experiences in our learning environments. Our third virtual panel was about fostering inclusive spaces in your classroom, with your teaching and within student learning communities.

Panelists:

Arig al Shaibah, Associate Vice-President, Equity and Inclusion

Faiza Hirji, Associate Professor, Humanities

Kalai Saravanamutt, Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry & Chemical Biology

Vanessa Watts, Assistant Professor, Social Sciences

Anna Moro, Associate Professor, Humanities

Alpha Abebe, Assistant Professor, Humanities

Panel Questions:

Why do you think culturally relevant/responsive teaching practices are important and how do they contribute to notions of inclusive excellence and the quality of the learning experience for all?

What successful strategies have you used to foster both inclusive course content and inclusive classroom context? What tools and resources have been helpful to you?

What personal challenges have you encountered in your own journey to developing personal efficacy in relation to inclusive teaching? OR What personal challenges do you hear from colleagues who are reluctant or resistant to engaging inclusive teaching practices and pedagogies? How have you responded to these personal challenges?

5 Key Takeaways from the panel

1. It is important for all students to feel included in the classroom and at the university. Representation is important to consider as it can impact a person's self-esteem, and how they internalize notions of self-worth and belonging. It is both morally and intellectually consistent to model inclusiveness in course materials in order for students to see themselves represented, and also other diverse groups. [8:58 – 9:29]
2. Changing terminology, understanding new nuances, or finding examples you never knew existed can all be challenging. Although a good thing, it can be overwhelming with the number of resources available and can be challenging to know where to start. [13:12 – 13:32]
3. As an instructor, there is a duty of care to your students. You are responsible for being aware of the formal policies in place, and to follow the code of conduct for instructors. [20:42 – 21:12]
4. While open and honest conversations are encouraged, it is important to establish guidelines. For instance, students should be encouraged to challenge ideas in a respectful manner, but they should not be called upon to share their experiences as they might not be comfortable doing so. [35:38 – 37:13]
5. Ensure that you are not approaching inclusiveness as a charitable act, a chore, or just to be politically correct. This comes across as disingenuous and is easily recognized by students, thus negatively affecting the culture of the classroom. [41:39 – 42:35]

Some key takeaways from each panelist

Faiza Hirji, Associate Professor, Humanities

- Faiza has gravitated towards work that is current and topical, and that students can relate to. [10:41 – 10:47]
- Discussing examples from different groups offers students something familiar to engage with, sometimes for the first time in an academic context. [11:30 – 11:42]
- Ask colleagues for recommendations on readings, consult on which practices are best, check out academic Twitter, refer to news articles and current events, and find the gaps in your knowledge and do the necessary research. [11:43 – 12:47]
- With remote teaching, some may feel cautious when discussing certain topics as lectures are recorded and can be shared out of context, and you cannot read the room to see how students are reacting. [15:14 – 15:33]
- Sometimes there can be an instinctive defensiveness when it comes to how we can be more diverse. When we think we've done everything right and we work really hard to create engaging material, it can be jarring to hear critiques suggesting that we should be doing something differently. [15:58 – 16:28]

Kalai Saravanamutt, Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry & Chemical Biology

- However well we may craft the material, if we don't reach the students then it can be a waste of time. We can only effectively reach students if we think about the learning environment; consider who you are teaching and the rich diversity of their experiences. We are obliged to level the playing field and equalize the opportunities for learning. [18:50 – 19:21]
- Think about this as a conference with people who speak different languages; if there are no interpreters in place, then it becomes a pointless and alienating exercise. Similarly, paying attention to the learning environment and the context of the classroom is very important. [19:52 – 20:12]
- Ensuring students feel a sense of belonging takes consistent effort, vigilance, and responsiveness. Having effective mentors to play a pivotal role in ensuring students succeed is very important. Having difficult conversations about topics such as racism where students can share some of their experiences is also encouraged. [21:57 – 25:56]

Vanessa Watts, Assistant Professor, Social Sciences

- Consider integrating more scholars that have been less recognized that can challenge the assumptions and discourse we are used to. This is not only about inclusive excellence, but is also how new ideas and knowledge emerge. [32:41 – 33:17]
- Work with small groups as much as possible so that students who might be shy or reluctant to speak in front of the entire class can have the opportunity to share their ideas with others. [34:24 – 34:41]
- Reach out to community organizations that are local and invite them to share their expertise in the classroom. If possible, field trips are also a great way to get students engaged in other types of learning (e.g. visiting residential schools and hearing directly from survivors). [34:42 – 35:37]

Alpha Abebe, Assistant Professor, Humanities

- Sometimes the barriers to belonging and inclusion are not as evident as others; this is only further exacerbated in an online environment. It is important to create an environment that welcomes students to approach you with their questions, challenges, and barriers. [43:26 – 44:27]
- Culture, content, and connection should be considered when developing successful strategies. Model what you ask of students and do so within the first few lectures to set the tone right off the bat. [44:38 – 45:11]
- Approach students who either dominate certain discussions or do not contribute and have one-on-one conversations with them to encourage more productive class participation. [48:51 – 50:20]
- Help build social capital among students in ways such as making connections between course content and the real world, and sharing enrichment opportunities that occur in the broader McMaster community. [51:56 – 52:49]

Anna Moro, Associate Professor, Humanities

- International students can be especially prone to feeling isolated without their family and social networks. When they run into any challenges or are struggling with a class, they tend to isolate even further. Anna has been working on ways to engage with these students and figure out how to build a stronger sense of community among students. [59:25 – 1:00:56]
- In an online environment, there are particular challenges; make sure to reiterate that this is a safe space where everyone's perspectives are welcome. Encourage students to reach out if they have any concerns or even set up one-on-one meetings with them. [1:05:50 – 1:08:36]

Referenced Resources:

[Equity and Inclusion Office](#)

[McMaster's Inclusive Teaching and Learning Guide](#)

[Technology choice including a comparison](#)

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