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UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
LEWIS HONORS COLLEGE

**A Literature Review on Inclusive Pedagogy and How
Instructors can create Inclusive and Effective Classroom
Groups**

by

Johnathan K. Hurley

AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DISTINCTION OF UNIVERSITY HONORS

Approved by the following:

Dr. Nicole Breazeale

Associate Extension Professor,

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LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

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Abstract

The presented document sought to analyze the ongoing issue of inclusive policy-making in the context of group work at institutions of higher education, while providing tailored advice for students in a particular field of study on how to behave inclusively. The researcher composed an extensive literature review to answer the first query, addressing the questions of: how to define inclusivity; how to form inclusive groups; and how to maintain inclusivity in classrooms. After this step, the researcher then took undertook efforts to craft a memo advising future students in CLD 490, a senior-level course for Community and Leadership Development students, on how to succeed and champion inclusivity in CLD 490.

The final results of this work supported the notion that inclusive group formation is largely dependent on the early structure and tone established by the instructor. It was clear that when instructors proactively focused on including students from different backgrounds and creating safeguards for their unique needs that group work became substantially more inclusive. Further, it was apparent that instructors need to be the one establishing the groups, instead of allowing students to form groups themselves. Another point of interest was the need for a clear exit policy, as students in difficult circumstances often struggle to come forward for help unless means of support are established prior to the onset of conflict.

On net, these results paint a favorable picture for a realistic track forward. The work will be helpful for instructors who are approaching this issue completely fresh, but once the heavy lifting is complete the end results would be net beneficial. For those who already have take efforts to be more inclusive, these findings show how to further their current success while also providing a reasonable challenge to review their efforts.

Project Overview

Introduction

Over the last year, I've had the opportunity to deeply dive into how diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts manifest in higher education. When the time came to craft my thesis for the Lewis Honors College, it made sense to tailor this interest to fit into one of my required major courses. CLD 490 is one half of the capstone for Community and Leadership Development majors and has a focus on group work. The heart of the class is a group project where classmates work together to solve a community or leadership development issue within their sphere of interest. I participated in this project and worked with my partner to develop a plan of action for Montaplast to implement an Equal Opportunity Plan after their workforce significantly diversified post-COVID. In conjunction with this work, my instructor, Dr. Nicole Breazeale, and I found there was merit in developing this thesis around inclusivity and group work.

On a wider scale, we should note that diversity minded conversations have been happening in community development efforts for the last half century, however, only in the last ten years have equity and inclusion shifted to the forefront. As dialogue shifts, increasing scrutiny is needed to determine whether efforts are truly providing for the creation and facilitation of inclusive communities. This project has been designed to consider broader community efforts in academic spaces to bolster inclusivity while maintaining a focus on group work as to ensure its timely completion.

Personal Bias Disclosure

Johnathan K. Hurley is a student at the University of Kentucky studying Community and Leadership Development, they are a non-binary and queer individual from rural Appalachia.

Research Questions

The guiding questions of this project are all in the context of a higher education classrooms. They are as follows:

1. How does one define "inclusivity"?
2. How does one go about facilitating the formation of an inclusive group?
3. How does one ensure that once groups are formed that they maintain a sense of inclusivity?

Methods

The sole researcher on this project opted to primarily review the available peer-reviewed literature on inclusivity, group work, and inclusivity in academic settings. The researcher relied heavily on the University of Kentucky's academic database and the platform Google Scholar to find the works reviewed. Additionally, some general academic resources used by other universities were analyzed.

Deliverables

This project had 2 major portions that sought to address the broader issues of inclusivity while also taking a personal approach to guiding future Community and Leadership Development students. Those 2 pieces are as follows:

1. [Literature Review](#) | The literature review in this document discusses the research currently available surrounding inclusivity in the classroom, how inclusive groups are formed, and what methods can be used to bolster inclusivity in the long term.
 2. [Personal Memo](#) | The person memo in this document will serve as the closing piece of an instructional document for future Community and Leadership Development students in the course CLD 490.
-

Findings from the Literature Review

Establishing Definitions

Key terms were first defined to guide the literature review and analysis. Those definitions are as follows:

1. Inclusivity | The deliberate choice to ensure that all parties involved with an event, assignment, etc. are treated equally and feel a sense of belonging (Pavão, et al. 2022).
2. Group | A small community of individuals united either by choice or by assignment with the collective purpose of completing an assigned objective.
3. Higher Education Institution | A college, university, or similar institution with the purpose of facilitating post-secondary education and the granting of post-secondary degrees including but not limited to certificate, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, etc.

Inclusive Classrooms

A key theme in the literature is the critical importance of instructors adopting an inclusive pedagogy and setting the right tone from the start of the class.

A pedagogy is the methods and practices of teaching used by an instructor. An inclusive pedagogy has become a focus for education professionals, and that feeds naturally into the development of more inclusive spaces in higher education. This pedagogy can be simply broken down as working to serve the unique needs of students from different backgrounds, and has become vital as classrooms become more diverse (Stentiford, et. al, 2020). Institutions internationally have started building this approach into their curriculum when preparing future educators due to a need to develop teacher's capacity for diversity and inclusion (Brussino, 2021).

In practice, the first step has to do with the culture of the classroom itself. An expectation of fair and equitable treatment must be instilled from the onset of a course by the instructor. This will take multiple forms, some as simple as modeling pronoun sharing on the first day of classes when instructors introduce themselves (Sathy, et. al, 2019). This minor step has worked in classrooms at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill for Associate Professor Viji Sathy as a means to establish a safe tone for their students (Sathy, et. al, 2019).

Beyond that, it needs to be apparent that intolerance is something that will not be tolerated. This is where a more rigid stance is necessitated. Instructors should be clear that acts of aggression based on identity will not be tolerated and that their classroom will be a safe space (Foste, et al., 2022). There are many ways this can manifest, including statements in a class

syllabus. Researchers have found that in campus residential housing that early work from advisors encouraging cultural awareness reduced microaggressions in their pseudo-academic spaces (Foste, et al., 2022). Though not directly corresponding to classroom work, this shows that a framework of inclusivity is effective among students enrolled in higher education institutions.

Encouraging student to push past stereotypes they may have about others in the class is also an important norm to establish. Doing this from the onset eliminates some barriers to inclusivity, the most pertinent being a lack of understanding of individual cultures and practices (Wang, et al., 2022). Some of the earliest work on this topic out of the University of Michigan found that professors must emphasize the necessity to challenge assumptions that surround different groups of students to break down gaps in communication and establish reasonable expectations for success (Saunders, et. al, 1997).

Designing Inclusive Groups

The research reviewed provides excellent advice for the next step in the process: namely how instructors can foster positive and inclusive group work across difference.

Allowing freeform groups to form and operate creates an opportunity for some to be excluded whereas having the instructor carefully assign groups can help counteract processes of bias and exclusion (Kohli, et. al, 2023). That being considered, there is a need to listen to student interests and who they want to work with as the groups are put together. Researchers in Europe found that students who are given some say, though not the final decisions, in this process feel more included and have a heightened sense of belonging (Messiou, 2019).

Despite the best efforts of an instructor, conflict may arise within a group that makes one or many members feel unsafe or excluded. When instructors take the lead in creating assigned groups, there must be a way for students to back out if major problems arise and they feel oppressed, excluded, or unsafe. Experiences with study groups that are similarly structured has shown that minority students are more successful and have a heightened sense of safety when they have a way to exit their groups if they become unwelcoming (Kohli, et. al, 2023).

Maintaining Inclusivity

Even when the groups are carefully assigned by the instructor to maximize inclusivity and an exit policy is available, research shows there are other steps that must be taken to keep diverse groups functioning effectively.

The task of maintaining that sense of inclusiveness comes down to continually reaffirming those principles laid out from the onset. The early educational approach makes it so students

understand the expectations, and it is imperative that those expectations not only be restated but be strictly enforced (Saunders, et. al, 1997). This helps to eliminate the notion that inclusive policies are only for appearance.

Furthermore, using the inclusive pedagogical approach, instructors should establish a clear way for students to communicate their concerns and provide empathetic responses (Brussino, 2021). A study conducted at midwestern public universities found that marginalized students feel significantly more included and humanized when their professors take the step to provide safe and accessible means of communication (Sandra, et al, 2016).

As different kinds of people work with one another in an academic setting, we ought to see this as a chance to educate on how to work with people from different backgrounds. One way to do this is with a bilateral approach, where you encourage students to step into the shoes of their peers to recognize their different identities, and see how different perspectives can be used as a way to achieve a mutual success (Talusán, 2022). Ideally, this approach would become engrained and extend beyond the classroom to a wider campus audience.

To continue to build on positive group experiences with diverse students, research also emphasizes that instructors should continue to support students and their work after the class is over. Instructors have a unique opportunity, particularly in STEM fields, to help their students network and provide marginalized community members with opportunities they would otherwise be passed over for... By continuing to work with and provide support for former students, these instructors are uniquely positioned to foster inclusivity well beyond their traditional sphere of influence (Dewsbury, et. al, 2019).

Closing Thoughts

Inclusion is a process. It cannot simply be achieved overnight, as has been repeatedly emphasized throughout the literature above. That means that the best time to start this work was yesterday, and the second best time is now. Instructors have a unique opportunity to open doors, educate students, and focus inclusivity. They can do so through clear and concise policies when uniting students in their classrooms and by fostering healthy dialogue surrounding what it means to work together. There will be a lot of room for growth, but as these practices become more widespread there is a genuine prospect that this behavior will become the status quo.

Personal Memo

Who am I?

I'm going to go out on a limb and take a shot in the dark by assuming that the person reading this doesn't know who I am. My name is Johnathan Hurley, but you can call me John, and I took CLD 490 with Dr. Breazeale in spring of 2023 as a junior. Allow me to be forthright by telling you that this class no cakewalk, but it is among the most rewarding experiences I've had during my time at the University of Kentucky. I had the pleasure of spending my semester working in a group of 2 to complete a proposal for how Montaplast in Frankfort, KY ought to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at their plant.

That all being said, I won't bore you further with information about me. Quite the contrary, my intention with these closing thoughts is to provide you with a framework for how to be all inclusive in your groups and to offer some unsolicited advice on how I believe you can best succeed in CLD 490.

Being Inclusive in 490

Students in Community and Leadership Development come from all walks of life and all have perspectives. There are students who come from the "normal" family background but I'd wager they are far and few between in our track of student. Rather, it is far more common to come across non-traditional students, students who come from single-parent households, and students who belong to various minority groups, to name a few. I saw this on the front end to make it clear that when you step into the classroom that you are walking into a diverse room with folks from all types of backgrounds, and you ought to view this above all as an opportunity.

Your perspective is more valuable than you know in how you will pursue your project this semester, so I truly encourage you to take the time to break down who you are before diving head first into the truly important work at hand. Understanding and embracing your identity will make this entire process significantly more heartfelt. It will give you a chance to chase after goals I'd wager you had never dreamed of before embracing that need for wholehearted introspection.

There's a quote my grandparents have told me since I was young that I have no idea the origins, but that won't stop me from sharing it with you. "When you know yourself, then you can begin to take steps in another person's shoes." I believe this phrase is uniquely applicable in your circumstance. As I encouraged you above to ask about who you are, once you've done that I encourage you to step into the shoes of your groupmates.

Doing so may seem minute at first, but I assure you it is vital. By taking the time to see their perspective on how the world functions and why your subject matters is important to them, your ability to truly collaborate will become so much more clear. Their perspective on these issues is central to your all's success, and it'd be a waste if you didn't take the time to at least consider it.

On a final note of this front, I'd like to challenge you to be your brother's keeper (not literally, think figuratively). Be willing to have hard conversations, and be willing to hold one another accountable to the principles of inclusivity. If someone makes a mistake, help them grow. If someone is consistently engaging in toxic behavior, speak with your professor. Your obligation is to keep this space safe, and I trust that you'll take this task and embrace throughout this semester.

Being Successful in 490

Now that I've taken my opportunity to wax poetic, let's get down to brass tax. This wouldn't be a guidebook without some healthy tips from a pro (and by pro, I mean someone that passed the class). I know that if you've made it this far, you've at least survived 5 semester of college so I won't bore you with too much to wrap this up. I'll offer my list of tricks, and then send you on your way. Without further delay, here we go~

1. Treat this like a passion project, not a homework assignment! By giving your all to this assignment, you'll create results that you'll value for years. Hell, maybe you'll use your narratives for your book one day or actually implement your proposal. Who knows? That's exactly why you give it your all.
2. Turn your work in on time! Your professor has a life too, and if you want solid feedback, the best way to get that is by meeting the deadlines.
3. Communicate like your life depends on it! Letting your professor and your group members know what is going on is the best way to ensure your ability to keep on pace. We all fall behind some times, but by talking to each other you alleviate some of the issues that come from fallback.
4. Don't just listen to me! Ask your professor and your friends who have gone through CLD 490 about their survival tips, everyone lives a different experience and could help you out of some issues this guidebook didn't see coming.

I think that hit most of the fundamentals. I sincerely hope this helped you out some in your pursuit of your Community and Leadership Development degree. If it didn't, don't tell me. If it did, well I did something right. I wish you all the best.

- *J. Hurley*

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