

Understanding Prejudice: Teaching Tips for College Instructors

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/hightips.htm>

This page contains tips on how to teach college students about topics related to prejudice, discrimination, and social justice.

Course Preparation

Be clear in your goals. Think carefully about what your educational goals are, and make sure that your course reflects these goals. For example, if your main goal is to teach students about prejudice research, it makes sense to focus on theories and studies. If, however, your goal is to help students understand their own prejudices or learn ways to reduce prejudice in society, you might consider a more personal approach that includes hands-on exercises and field experiences.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Look through other people's course syllabi for ideas that you might adapt to suit your purposes (with credit to others when appropriate). Read books and articles that describe classroom exercises and offer advice on teaching about prejudice. Ask experienced colleagues for feedback on your course syllabus and teaching ideas.

Choose top-notch course materials. There are dozens of textbooks and anthologies related to prejudice, and thousands of videos and other teaching materials to go with them. Make sure you review what's available and get the very best for your students. At the end of your course, you might also ask students to contribute one video or reading suggestion for future classes. Often students will be aware of new books or films, or they will know of good materials from other classes they have taken.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Courses on prejudice will only succeed if students feel safe to share what they think. One way to create a safe climate is by setting certain ground rules on the first day of class, such as:

* ***Freedom.*** This rule allows students to opt out of watching any videos or participating in any class discussions or activities that make them uncomfortable, as long as they let you know their reasons. Few students will opt out, but all will feel more at ease. Moreover, by allowing students this freedom, you will become more free yourself (e.g., to cover emotionally challenging material).

* ***Confidentiality.*** This rule mandates that anything said in class is automatically confidential unless students have obtained permission from the speaker to share what was said (e.g., "I liked what you said and was wondering if I could share it with my roommate"). If students know that their comments will remain confidential, they are less likely to censor their views during class discussions.

* ***Respect.*** Students do not have to agree with what other people say, but they should accord others a basic degree of respect. Reactions such as rolling one's eyes, smirking, or making fun of a classmate should be explicitly discouraged. One way to do this is by counting class participation toward final grades and defining participation in part as helping other students share their points of view. Instructors

can also point out that if students embrace diversity and tolerance, they should display these values inside as well as outside the classroom.

In addition to these ground rules, be sure to reward student participation directly with positive comments (e.g., "That's an excellent point..."), especially when students make comments that are risky or potentially embarrassing. Conversely, never make light of a student remark, however much you may disagree with it. Instead, turn all comments into opportunities for education and dialogue.

Other Principles for Effective Teaching

Although by no means exhaustive, here are several other principles for effective teaching:

Relevance. When discussing particular topics, relate them to students' own lives. For example, when you discuss racial segregation, talk about segregation in campus dining facilities. When you talk about gender stereotypes, refer to current movies, films, and music. The more that students see topics as directly relevant to their own lives, the more motivated they will be to learn about them.

Cohesion. Try to create a communal feeling in which students support and enrich each other. For example, ask students to be the eyes and ears for each other, bringing to class prejudice-related news articles, cartoons, announcements of campus events, and so on. One way to encourage this behavior is by challenging students to make the class better as a result of their being in it. Another is by modeling the desired behavior (e.g., bringing in news articles yourself).

Communication. Communicate your expectations and grading criteria as explicitly as possible, and set up multiple channels of communication for students to reach you. That way, shy students will have low-risk channels (e.g., email), and gregarious students will have other channels (e.g., face-to-face contact during office hours). You might also set up a class listserv or use Blackboard [or Moodle section] so that students can email each other (e.g., to let others know of an upcoming TV program related to prejudice).

Variety. Be sure to spice up the course with a variety of class activities, assignments, and methods of presentation. Depending on the topic in question, consider supplementing lectures with class discussions, small group discussions, mini-experiments, student presentations, guest lectures or panels, videotapes, web demonstrations, role-playing exercises, and other techniques.

Interactivity. To avoid the "talking head" syndrome so common in higher education, try not to go for more than 5 or 10 minutes without involving students actively. For instance, instead of simply describing an experiment, stop halfway through and ask students to predict the research results. Or better still, preface your discussion of the experiment by asking students how they would design a study to answer the research question.

Integration. Integrate multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice in all areas of instruction rather than confining them to courses specifically on these topics. For example, when testing psychology students, consider creating exam items that use same-sex couples and/or names that are associated with people of color, such as:

Q1. Tamika and Lisa have started dating. According to equity theory, Tamika will perceive the distribution of rewards in their relationship as fair when the rewards are proportionate to:

A. Her needs

- B. Her desires
- C. Lisa's needs and desires
- D. Each of their contributions to the relationship

Similarly, be sure to include examples of people with physical disabilities when teaching about topics other than disability. By including people of all ages, ethnicities, physical abilities, and backgrounds, you can teach about diversity regardless of the topic in question.

Caring. Perhaps the single most important ingredient for effective teaching is to care about students. Here are some concrete ways to show students they matter:

- * Take their questions and concerns seriously. If you don't know the answer to a question, promise to find out and share the answer during the next class session.
- * Organize and prepare well for each class session, using handouts, outlines, audiovisual materials, or other instructional materials that go beyond the assigned readings.
- * Make sure all photocopies are easy to read and contain full reference citations in case students want to locate the original sources.
- * Make yourself available to students after class and between sessions, taking time to learn their names and get to know them personally.

By demonstrating that you respect and care about students, you increase the chances that they will become engaged in the class, and you open the door to relationships in which you learn from students just as they learn from you.

More material on this topic and other topics can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.