Carie Schneider

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Statement

As a queer woman and first-generation college student who experienced poverty both in childhood and adult life, I recognize how rarely my students have someone with my perspective and experience teaching their courses. Without centering my own perspective or politics, I nonetheless serve as a mentor for younger students in their first encounters with higher education, particularly understanding those whose families have limited or no experience with academia. As much as my personal example contributes to the diversity of the academy, my position as instructor shouldn't overshadow that of my students; in my student-centered approach to education, I am a co-collaborator with my students, letting my individuality become a constituent part of the diversity of the classroom as a whole. I deploy my privilege and power as an instructor to amplify my students' voices and experiences and to advocate for their success.

I also strive to ensure that texts assigned in my literature courses reflect the true diversity of history and expand the canon to recognize those voices previously marginalized. This is more difficult—but even more vital—in required survey courses like the one I teach. I carefully balance expansions of the canon—highlighting women's voices, authors of color, writings of the enslaved or colonized, and "uncloseting" queer canonical authors—with the comprehensive coverage of eras, movements, and genres required by learning objectives and standardized tests. Diversity on the syllabus, however, cannot just be limited to the reading list; my teaching also accounts for the diversity of students encountering this material.

One of the greatest challenges in college teaching is adapting to the broad variety of learning experiences students bring with them. I've had a single class of 25 include students from elite college-prep schools; students from underfunded public schools; homeschooled students; veterans returning to college after time deployed and years after leaving high school; single parents and students working multiple jobs; and students for whom English is not their first language, including international students and immigrants, documented or otherwise. I encourage my students to see their diverse backgrounds as valuable accumulations of insight and skills that could only come from lived experience. My job as instructor is to help students find ways to put those experiences to use in the college classroom. For example, a student from Singapore found he was exceptionally adept at discussing and analyzing film, and combined this with his personal experience with compulsory military service to analyze the visual rhetoric of the movie *American Sniper* juxtaposed with Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"; as an older student with strong time-management skills, he teamed up with a small peer workshopping group who could share their skills as native speakers of English while they learned from his organization and discipline. Together, that workshopping group produced some of the strongest work in the course over the semester, and did so by embracing their diverse skillsets and learning from one another.

In all of my courses, I strive for universal accessibility, recognizing the diversity of student abilities, experiences, and learning styles. My online teaching experience has led me to adopt even more adaptive technologies in the face-to-face classroom. Something as simple as providing ebook and audiobook versions of assigned texts can make a reading-intensive course more accessible for all, from the visually impaired to the student with a long commute. Asynchronous online discussion allows students to participate at their own pace and also eliminates the affective factors that make some students reluctant to participate in oral discussions; by doing so, more student voices are included in discussion, making the student-centered classroom truly centered on *all* students, not just the most vocal few.

Greater accessibility of course content gives me flexibility to work with each student individually, helping them identify their own strengths and weaknesses and collaboratively crafting adaptive approaches to assignments that can build into a skillset for success in the rest of their courses. The idea of *equality* in the classroom may assume treating students as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass; but *equity* is founded upon equal attention to each student as an *individual*. I take the time to forge individual partnerships with each student—even in large classes—which foster student success in three important ways: first, by making myself approachable as an instructor, mentor, or colleague, students are more likely to be open with me about their individual needs; next, a more personal, collegiate atmosphere in the classroom makes course material more relatable and accessible; finally, by treating each student as an individual, students learn to embrace their uniqueness, and feel empowered to take agency in directing their own course of study.

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Forging personal, collegiate partnerships with forty individual students seems impossible on paper, but it is relatively simple to initiate in practice. For example, on the first day of the semester, I ask students to fill out index cards listing the name they go by, their pronouns, the prior English courses and instructors they've had, and their favorite book or movie. I invite students to get into small groups to introduce themselves to each other, and I go around the room to listen and speak informally with each group. Here is where a small change can make a big difference: as I collect each student's index card, I introduce myself by name, and shake their hand; each student introduces themselves to me, as well, saying their name out loud so I can repeat it—pronounced correctly, not read awkwardly from a class roster that may not even list their correct name—and make eye contact, letting them know I'm glad to meet them. This might seem "hokey," but my students have had overwhelmingly positive responses to this ritual of beginning the semester; some have even stated that in previous semesters, they never met any of their classmates, or spoke one-on-one with their professor a single time, and my more personal, engaged approach was a very welcome change.

My course evaluations also reflect the impact of my collegiate approach to teaching, founded on inclusivity and individual respect. In highlights from evaluations of courses—both in-person and fully online—students emphasize my relatability, helpfulness, and respect:

- "Ms. Carie understands her students' needs and is readily available to help whenever necessary. She is always willing to help her students improve."
- "Carie has a way of relating to her students that really helps when it comes to explaining assignments or reading texts. She is one of the most effective English teachers I will probably ever have."
- "The instructor really wants to engage us and uses humor and examples that students can relate to in order to explain the material. She is incredibly respectful and if she's reading this, I think it's really cool that you asked what pronouns we prefer... That's super accepting and not a lot of professors are that considerate."
- "She did a really great job with helping us, but also let us figure a lot out on our own"

By letting students "figure a lot out on [their] own," my students learn to trust their own wisdom, build well-reasoned opinions, and develop their own voice. By centering the student as director of their own education, and respecting them as an individual, each student is empowered to "figure out on their own" how and where to speak truth to power, build community, and constructively engage with the world outside the classroom. I continue to reflect on and work towards a better balance between encouraging students to figure things out on their own, and offering necessary context and information. I've frequently struggled with assigning historical texts from, for example, the civil rights era, only to find that many students have little to no historical understanding of this time period. How much history needs to be taught in a composition course, to ensure that students can engage fully with the texts and authors assigned? My current strategy to overcome these disparities in preparedness is to offer students encouragement and gentle guidance (suggested links for further reading, for example) to move toward—rather than shy away from—the gaps in their knowledge and practice seeking out answers independently.

Having recently attended the American Studies Association's 2017 annual meeting in Chicago, themed "Pedagogies of Dissent," I have a wealth of notes on teaching practices for addressing potentially controversial topics (race, privilege, violence, inequality, etc.) in our politically-charged contemporary moment, which I hope to employ in future courses. I'm also excited to put into practice in the classroom the kind of "backchannel" discussions I engage with at conferences; sometimes the most vibrant debate and discussion appears in the conference's Twitter hashtag, not in the Q&A sessions, which are often dominated by senior scholars. By encouraging student participation in and ownership of backchannel discussions parallel to the course itself—either via existing social media sites or designated classroom technologies—students not only engage with course material on a more personal level, but also get to exercise their agency outside of the traditional structure of the instructor-led classroom.

By giving students not only the agency but also the tools to take control of their learning and chart their own course of academic participation, my teaching embraces diversity and promotes inclusion in an equitable way.