The Joy of Adjusting Teaching for Student Success

Mayuko Nakamura

Illinois State University

As an educational developer, I offer course redesign workshops to increase student success at my institution. Although my primary work is with faculty, I have been teaching undergraduate courses on and off for over 20 years to keep myself current with classroom experiences. However, I have recently recognized that my work has increasingly taken me out of teaching college students as my workload has increased as an educational developer during the pandemic. To increase my lived experience and knowledge about students "post-pandemic", I taught a class in the Spring 2023 semester that the psychology department considers "a class with potential student success issues." I found out from the students that many of them were retaking this class while others just started college this semester. About two-thirds of the students are students of color, which was still rare at our Predominantly White Institution (PWI). I was excited I could practice what I have been preaching as an equitable educator.

Throughout the semester, I did everything I could to teach inclusively and equitably. I used all the strategies I usually share with instructors. I started the semester with an inclusive syllabus and offered a lot of opportunities for community building in class. As a result, the students seemed to be feeling comfortable with their peers and me and actively participating in the class. Several students did not show up to the classes for the first couple of weeks, so I sent them caring personal e-mails to check in with them and encouraged them to attend the classes. My inclusive and equitable strategies were working as expected.

Then in the fourth week, things started changing unexpectedly and I struggled with student engagement and participation. I had many students who reported mental and physical health issues, students with family obligations, students with deaths in their family or close

friendship circle, students with long-hour jobs, unmotivated students, and students with problematic habits (i.e. procrastination and under-developed self-regulation, etc.). I encouraged them to work with professionals in student support units like counseling services and student accommodations. I also reached out to them individually. However, the sheer number of students with issues overwhelmed me. Although my initial equitable teaching practice of inclusive syllabus and caring e-mail were working for the first part of the semester, these tools did not fully address the issues that my students were having in the middle of the semester. I felt I was not ready for "real students" after all, although theoretically, I knew these external circumstances are important to consider when teaching inclusively and equitably.

Now that the semester is over, and as I've reflected on the class, here are additional strategies I employed for the students. Many of my students would not have passed the class if I hadn't implemented these strategies in the mid-semester. The end-of-semester student feedback and casual remarks from my students also informed me how much they appreciated these additional strategies. In the future, I would like to conduct scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research on these strategies so I would be able to systematically analyze the impact of these strategies in teaching. For now, I'll share in this article my thoughts on additional inclusive and equitable teaching strategies.

Flexibility and Structure

Flexibility is an important element of inclusive and equitable teaching (Fuentes et al., 2020). Life happens and we'd like to have students succeed despite their life issues. Research also shows that the lack of structure is also problematic for the students (Sathy & Hogan, 2019). At our university, instructors and I always discuss this tension between providing structure and being flexible. I allowed my students to submit late assignments with valid reasons, but I felt like some students took advantage of this option. For example, a few students came to me at the end of the semester believing that they should be able to submit everything at once because the mental health issues they suffered throughout the semester were finally resolved. I'm not sure if I

achieved a perfect balance between the two but I think it is important for instructors to reflect on the good balance of the structure and flexibility for their students.

Developmental Approach

College students, especially freshmen, are still exploring their identities, building meaningful relationships, and developing their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills. With the impact of COVID-19 in the past years, many of them had "arrested development" in one or more of these areas. I'm not sure all their issues are related to their developmental challenges, but I felt it was important to consider what they could do at that moment and how to help them develop their skills.

When my students started having issues with attendance and assignment submissions, I initially blamed myself for setting them up for failure by being too lenient. But one day, I realized that I should focus on how I can help my students build the skills and attitudes to attend classes regularly and submit the assignments on time. I talked with them to figure out what prevented them from submitting assignments on time. In doing so, I learned that some of them just needed extra days to submit assignments, so the students and I came up with a reasonable plan for them to submit late assignments. To combat sporadic attendance, I gave extra incentives to attend the classes by telling them that the attendance would affect their final grades when they are in between the grades (like A/B, or B/C, etc.). Although some instructors may think I'm too accommodating, I feel that instructors must meet students where they currently are and offer support as much as they are able.

Asset-based Care

Caring is one of the dimensions of inclusive and equitable teaching (Guzzardo et al., 2021). However, it is extremely hard to provide individualized care to all students when almost all students in the class need different things. When showing care to my students, I had to be careful not to fall into a deficit-thinking mindset about their abilities and behaviors. Instead of thinking

that their family obligations are problematic to learning, I explored how I could change my late assignment policies to make them more family-friendly. I also tried to scaffold their aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) to help them build their future careers as psychologists and psychiatrists. Aspirational capital, the "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p.77) was one of my students' assets.

Through my lived experience of teaching this class, I learned a lot from my students about their struggles to transition to college and how they overcame them. I also enjoyed being part of their journeys as they figured out how to become thriving college students. Although I reflected on the challenging aspects of working with students from different backgrounds in this paper, I was also inspired by their diversity of thoughts, experiences, and aspirations. I hope all instructors will find the challenges of adjusting our instruction to be worthwhile and we will build together more equitable and inclusive campus communities.

This experience also helped me to revise and expand my knowledge and strategies for equitable and inclusive teaching. I will share all I learned from this experience with the instructors at my university and beyond my role as an educational developer. Additionally, I feel more empathy towards instructors who struggle to implement equitable and inclusive teaching strategies because my experience taught me how students nowadays juggle so many challenges outside of their academic lives. I was sympathetic to the instructors even before this experience, but until I put myself in their shoes with very diverse students, I didn't realize how much time is spent in figuring out each student's needs and deciding on equitable ways to help them thrive in the classroom. Moreover, as we try to help the students, we cannot forget the instructors' well-being. I struggled with the tension between helping the students and keeping my work-life balance last semester and had to constantly keep in mind that my well-being is also important. I can also discuss this aspect as another important consideration of equitable and inclusive teaching in my future professional development workshop. In order to make inclusive and equitable teaching sustainable on campus, we need to approach professional development in a more holistic way that includes student wellbeing, student success, and faculty wellbeing.

References

Fuentes, M. A., Zelaya, D. G., & Madsen, J. W. (2021). Rethinking the course syllabus:

Considerations for promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*,

48(1), 69-79. https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959979

Guzzardo, M. T., Khosla, N., Adams, A. L., Bussmann, J. D., Engelman, A., Ingraham, N., ... &

Taylor, S. (2021). "The ones that care make all the difference": Perspectives on student-

faculty relationships. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(1), 41-58.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-020-09522-w

Sathy, V., & Hogan, K. A. (2019). *How to make your teaching more inclusive*. Chronicle of Higher

Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-make-your-teaching-more-

inclusive/.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community

cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006