

Guidance on Teaching for Social Justice in Irish Higher Education

Insights from the DISCs Project

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NATIONAL FORUM
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DISCs

DISCIPLINES INQUIRING
INTO SOCIETAL CHALLENGES



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Introduction

This document is designed to support the development of teaching for social justice in the higher education (HE) sector in Ireland. It offers guidance to those who teach in any and all HE disciplines on embedding a social justice orientation in one's teaching. This guidance is based on lessons learned from a National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning-funded project based across University College Cork (UCC), Dublin City University (DCU) and Maynooth University (MU) called 'Disciplines Inquiring into Societal Challenges' (DISCs). The project ran from 2019-2021 and as such, was significantly affected by the pandemic. It was focused on the development of 17 Project Advocates, i.e., staff who teach in a variety of disciplines in the three institutions. The project developed a series of resources, most significant of which is the DISCs website <https://discs.ie>. This site has curated several resources including recommended readings, workshop slides, DISCs Advocates' professional journeys, and a self-assessment tool for those reflecting on their practice on a regular basis. The project collected data on the Advocates' experiences and, with the support of USI, also ran a national survey of HE students' experiences of social justice and equality themes in the classroom and on campus.

This guidance document is structured in three parts. First, we briefly consider the cultural and structural context of higher education in Ireland and internationally, and how contested and marginalised 'teaching for social justice' is in this context. Second, we look at some key findings from our own research with students and staff who teach in Irish HE on the question of teaching for social justice. Third, we offer practitioner guidance on the development of teaching for social justice within and across Irish HE institutions.

Teaching for 'Social Justice' in the Current Higher Education Environment

The concept of 'teaching for social justice' in HE is contested, as it draws in questions about personal and institutional priorities/politics and working conditions¹. But it may broadly refer to progressive efforts to: secure equitable outcomes for diverse and typically under-represented students; engage diverse students and communities inclusively in inquiring into real-world local and international problems of injustice and inequity, and; work collectively towards equitable working conditions for all HE staff. Clearly, the leadership and culture of HE institutions will play a significant role in whether these efforts succeed. Government higher education policy and institutional leadership in Ireland and in many countries has, in recent decades typically involved adopting a managerial approach. Managerialism is not simply about 'good leadership': it is about incorporating business values into the organisation and culture of higher education². Managerialism focuses on outputs (e.g. raising student numbers or high publication rates) before inputs (e.g. staffing programmes to meet student numbers). As part of a wider neoliberal worldview, it regards institutional competition as a means of 'driving' innovation (e.g. institutions compete for state funding for once-off equality projects, instead of adequately funding long-term structural and cultural change). The resulting, declining ratio of core state funding to private funding has led to several crises. One of these is the rise of casualised, teaching-only contracts. Evidence indicates casualised staff are no less motivated to improve their teaching, but experience limited professional learning, support and career development³, while also being paid far less, being less free to engage students beyond the classroom and lacking opportunity to conduct research they can teach from. Despite casualisation being a gendered (as well as classed and racialised) problem, responses to it have been absent from recent policy efforts to promote gender equality in senior HE ranks⁴.

¹ For further discussion of the contested nature of 'social justice', see the DISCs literature review at <https://discs.ie/resources/litreview>

² Lynch, K., Grummell, B. and Devine, D. (2012) *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

³ McComb, V., Eather, N. and Imig, S. (2021) Casual academic staff experiences in higher education: insights for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development* 26(1): 95-105.

⁴ Ivancheva, M., Lynch, K. and Keating, K. (2019) Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy. *Gender, Work and Organization* 26: 448-462. O'Keefe, T. and Courtois, A. (2019) 'Not one of the family': Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university. *Gender, Work and Organization* 26: 463-479.

A much longer tradition of scholarship on the origins of HE shows that universities in particular have historically adopted, at best, highly contradictory approaches to questions of staff, student and societal equity. Institutionally-led initiatives on access and participation have existed for decades, and are arguably increasing with the advent of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Community Engagement (CE) and Universal Design institutional supports. While these initiatives have had some success, their existence and prioritisation depend on whether they are broadly perceived as supporting, rather than challenging institutional values of meritocracy (i.e. individual/local effort and talent largely explains success), measurement and competition (i.e. in league table rankings)⁵ and cost-saving. Similar contradictions pertain to the historically recent turn towards improving the quality of HE teaching. This turn, while valuable in many respects, is not exempt from the institutional view of students as consumers, and may often advocate a “generic, skills and competency-focused view of teaching” which elides “disciplinarity, sociopolitical context and student need”⁶. These issues create specific problems for staff who teach and for students. Alongside the unsustainable and insecure nature of HE work for many, diluted messages about equity may undermine staff inquiry with students, colleagues and communities into how social justice questions can be brought alive in the classroom. With these issues in mind, the forthcoming subsection briefly considers the experiences of students in Irish HE regarding learning about equality and justice. We then briefly outline what existing research says about teaching for social justice interventions like DISCs, and then, how our Advocates reflected on DISCs itself.

Learning from Students’ Experiences in the Irish Higher Education Context

As part of the DISCs project, we distributed a national, anonymous, online student survey - with the support of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and academic and professional colleagues - in order to garner students’ views on, and experiences of, social justice in higher education. To our knowledge, this survey is the first to be administered to third level students in Ireland on this topic. The survey was live for a period of two months between December 2020 to end January 2021.

Over 1300 completed surveys returned within the specified time period were analysed for the purposes of developing a deeper understanding of students’ impressions, experiences and understandings of issues pertaining to equality, equity/fairness, social and cultural diversity (including sexual orientation; gender; race-ethnicity; social class; ability status), and to rights, inclusion, participation etc. in higher education. A brief synopsis of findings pertaining to students’ experiences of learning about equality and justice is presented here, and more will be published in due course.

Overall, the findings suggest that students hold very strong views about the integral nature of social justice education at third level. Over two thirds of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that social justice themes and issues should feature explicitly as part of all academic programmes, irrespective of discipline or programme of study. Over three quarters of respondents, in fact, felt that students should be encouraged to reflect on their own relative positions of advantage and disadvantage, in terms of their social class, race-ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc. Whereas asking students to examine their own privilege and biases remains a significant challenge for educators in any field, the fact that this is widely acknowledged among students as an important feature of their learning presents important opportunities to embed self-reflection around power and privilege as an integral feature of teaching and learning.

Whereas the overwhelming majority of students (almost 90%) feel that it is important for them to deepen their understanding of social injustices and power inequalities in society, they are less clear about their chosen academic programme’s investment in matters of social justice, with only 45% ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’

5 Rizvi, F. and Lingard, B. (2011) Social equity and the assemblage of values in Australian higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 41: 5-22.

6 Gourlay, L. and Stevenson, J. (2017) Teaching excellence in higher education: Critical perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education* 22(4): 391-395.

that their academic programme has a strong commitment to diversity/equity, fairness and inclusion. Similarly, less than half ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the perspectives and interests of minority and marginalised groupings in society were adequately reflected in their courses of study or that their lecturers led meaningful discussions about social justice issues, such as racism, sexism or homophobia. Moreover, only half of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that there were sufficient opportunities for those from traditionally excluded or underrepresented groups to speak and be heard in class and less than 20% believed that the recruitment of historically underrepresented groups was a priority at their academic institution.

In summary, a majority of third level students we surveyed feel very strongly about the importance of teaching for social justice. However, many feel that their academic programmes and institutions could do more to ensure meaningful promotion and integration of social justice principles, themes and practices.

Learning from Research on Initiatives to Support Teaching for Social Justice

There is a significant body of research on teaching for social justice, which is commonly associated with the critical pedagogy tradition. But questions of social justice – contested and often ill-defined as they are – tend to occupy a marginal position in the recent history of scholarship on teacher education for HE. Indeed, initiatives which prepare people to teach for social justice in primary and secondary schools tend to be better researched than those focusing on staff who teach in HE. We conducted a search of literature on the topic published between 2009 and 2019. Our search yielded 3,131 articles, 425 of which were included for close review. These reviewed articles varied widely in their aims and foci, and only 14 presented empirical discussion of initiatives seeking to develop teachers in the field of social justice⁷. Most studies looked at the immediate rather than long-term effects of such programmes on participants.

The full literature review is available on the DISCs website. Unsurprisingly, the research reviewed emphasised the necessity of a whole-institution approach, where teachers are supported to develop inclusive teaching practices in a planned, collaborative way – not just with their students, but with the wider communities they may be part of. Other studies emphasised the need to create opportunities for teachers to productively examine their own discomfort and position regarding racism in education in a sustained way that avoids projecting discomfort on to the bodies of staff or students of colour (e.g. by painting them as the problem). Much research problematised how teachers may hold broadly liberal values around accepting difference, rather than examining how patterned inequalities make up the ‘business as usual’ of education. For example, Ching’s HE study⁸ sought to support educators to adopt an ‘equity-minded’, inquiry-based approach to their teaching, which helps students navigate not just the module curriculum, but the hidden curriculum, i.e., institutional values and norms which exclude certain students. This study showed how challenging it is in a HE culture that promotes individualised narratives of student success to shift educators towards collectively analysing how their teaching could change to reduce or eliminate student inequalities. Finally, institutional barriers to social change featured strongly in the literature as undermining sustained efforts to teach for social justice. A key barrier was a lack of explicit and meaningful prioritising of equality across the stages of teacher development.

Learning from Our Research with DISCs Project Advocates

While the DISCs project itself was a time-limited intervention, it sought to begin a more focused process of addressing some of the above concerns, in part through the engagement of Project Advocates, i.e., staff who teach in various disciplines in UCC, DCU and MU. The Advocates sought to develop their teaching from a social justice perspective through public goal-setting, whole-group, small group and online workshops, reading and reflective writing, and for some Advocates, some peer teaching observation, feedback and reading/further inquiry recommendations. The Advocates (10 women, 7 men, all White) applied to be part of the project. They

⁷ Full discussion of the review and search terms available on the DISCs project website at <https://discs.ie/resources/litreview>

⁸ Ching, C.D. (2018) Confronting the equity “learning problem” through practitioner inquiry. *The Review of Higher Education* 41(3): 387-421.

reflected a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, degrees of teaching experience, levels of job security and types of contract (e.g. long-serving academic on a permanent contract, early career academic on a fixed-term academic contract, relatively early career teacher on a teaching-focused, fixed-term contract, or postdoctoral researcher on a fixed term contract with some teaching responsibilities). While a small number of Advocates in one of the partner institutions had the experience of peer observation and feedback from a member of the project team, this was not possible in all institutions, in part due to the move to remote teaching in response to the pandemic from March 2020.

In spite of disruption to in-person workshops and peer teaching observation caused by the pandemic, the space created by the project to collectively learn about and share practice, and to focus in depth on what students need, was regarded by Advocates as valuable.

The methodology that the project employed was very reflective and was very effective as a result... it was really, really nice to find people who committed to the idea of a university as a vehicle for good. And were prepared to put the time and the work into thinking about what that means for them in their context. (Interview 1)

One of the most meaningful things through the DISCs project, for me, was getting to meet, and talking with, and hearing from colleagues in other contexts. And that then challenged me to think, well to what extent could I do that? (Interview 9)

I just felt because of DISCs I wanted to be just more mindful, more thoughtful in the readings I chose. In the activities that I planned. In the ways I could help the students connect and how I could help them find themselves in the course really. Because of course it's not about the teacher at the end of the day. It's not about me, it's about them and it's about their world and what they bring forward. And how they can individualise and personalise the learning. (Interview 3)

Advocates were asked to identify areas of practice and reflection to prioritise during the project – typically focusing on a module that they would like to inquire into and develop further from a social justice perspective. Given that the period of focused teaching practice and reflection was interrupted, it is difficult to disentangle some of the learning and changes they made from the remote teaching adaptations forced by institutional pandemic responses. Some felt the project was aligned with – rather than necessarily making a significant difference to – work they were already doing. Often many did not have the time to reflect systematically due to pandemic-related work pressures. For these and other reasons, the changes made below are limited. Nevertheless, several reported trying new approaches, or enhancing their existing efforts, to address social justice issues and/or create more democratic and inclusive environments with/for students. Some felt they had grown in capacity to engage students on sensitive issues, to take account of what students are going through when communicating expectations, and/or to rethink the resources they use. Most indicated a relative sharpening of their consciousness about students and various social justice issues in the classroom. While the project prioritised critical reflection and consciousness-raising over ‘teaching tips’, the comments from Project Advocates below reflect some of their reflective efforts and practical changes.

(The students and I did) walking debates... one I did was around climate justice and the role of technology in that. And you know kind of asked the students to literally take a stand. You know in the feedback that kind of came back was something that you still really enjoyed and I think there was a sense of curiosity around what we were doing. But also then listening respectfully to each others' points of view. (Interview 2)

I absolutely do think my approach changed. And certainly being a member of the DISCs project gave me the confidence to make that change... Because it really did give me the energy and the catalyst to address issues that I would normally have shied away from because I felt ill equipped

and not knowledgeable enough to actually bring it up in a space with other people. And this year, because of DISCs, or in semester two is when I actually mentioned it, in February, as part of a placement project I put in place four dedicated lectures around social justice issues that relate to (my discipline) across the board. And the resources from the project and that actual understanding there were people there I could talk to, did help me to be more... it did help me to take risks, I felt more confident in my ability to say "I don't have all the answers but I have questions, and I know that you guys have questions. We should have questions about these areas." (Interview 8)

I have come up with some exciting, new assessment types for next semester. And these include using reflective journals with students so that I can get a really good feel, and get them to actually engage and think about what their own thoughts and feelings are about the social justice issues that we cover. (Interview 10)

One of the things that this project has prompted me to do is to reflect on my approach in the classroom. And it coincided with me being added to - I think it's called turning university software... trying to make classes a little bit more interactive. That's difficult to do with large numbers. So one of the things I've been doing is using the (student survey) poll... I feel that helped to democratise the class a bit more. Because it wasn't just me speaking and giving my view... I wanted a student to feel a little bit more included in the classes. And to give their views. (Interview 5)

(I created) a reading list of, for students to do a book review... But when I got together the books that I wanted, eleven out of the twelve were male authored... bringing the subject and the issue (of gender) out into the open I found quite useful... that's just one example of the practical kind of way that you know you'd be trying to deepen the curriculum and improve the syllabus. But you know not always successfully... but at least doing it much more openly and discursively with the students (Interview 7)

A key area where many felt they had made some progress was in becoming more student-centred – both in terms of ensuring students being supported to think critically about complex issues, and, in the context of the pandemic, reflecting on what really matters as regards their expectations of students. However, accessibility and support for disabled students was an area that several felt they needed development in, beyond a student being 'flagged' institutionally as having a disability. Reflecting the challenges facing most Advocates this year, one Advocate (in the third quote below) reflected on how the project prompted a process of reflection on supporting students. This could lead to more practical inquiry and action in the future, but it also clearly required further, long-term support.

I would have, I would see myself as a responsive teacher. But what DISCs has, has kind of... unlocked (is) you know that, that sense that I'm opening up diverse ways in which students can engage with me and with the content of the material that I teach and also in their options or how they are learning is evaluated. So, you know it's less about maybe that me as an edu-carer and more about that critical kind of... you know, critical perspective. Having the students themselves engaging in critical thinking around their own lives and engaging in the modules that I teach from those perspectives more actively. So it's turned a kind of a key to...that it's not just the responsivity to their needs it's to actually, it's that their identification and critical interrogation of those needs and how they need me to support them in that. (Interview 15)

The project did make me more aware of (disability and accessibility issues). So I will always now look up the list of students and anyone who is registered with the disability service, you know, should come up. Because sometimes they might approach me, but oftentimes they won't, particularly with a large undergraduate class. So I would be aware of that now... There are other learning needs I'm not really aware of, you know, and they don't seem to be on the system. And I find that a difficulty. (Interview 11)

I think definitely with COVID, even more so but I hope I'll continue as well, even more like "listen guys, if you can't do this, or you're struggling, don't worry, it doesn't matter". So I think I've become even more... I feel even more strongly about students just having their own agencies as long as you're finding out that they're okay and you have shown that you've got an open door and they can talk to you anytime. And if they don't get back to you, that's also fine. I think I feel even more strongly about that now because there's a lot of discussions of like, you know, students got to answer emails and they've got to, if they're late they get penalised for their essays and all of that. And I'm like, no, you know, no they don't, no they don't, you know. And "oh they're such a great student", and I'm always asking now "why? Why are they a great student? What does that actually mean?" (Interview 16)

I'm not sure its massively changed how I relate to students particularly... I feel less good I think at supporting the student who like doesn't get what I'm saying you know, I'm not very good I don't think and I think this remains the case of thinking about new ways to present information if they don't get it the first time... if that makes sense... it's something I'm very conscious of and something I need to work on, so I suppose being involved in this project kind of has heightened my awareness of that but I'm not sure I've got the answer to what to do about it as a result of being involved. (Interview 17)

One of the Advocates' critiques of the DISCs project related to the fact that it involved self-selection 'into' the project (which itself involved an expression of interest and 1-1 discussion process to select people to take part). Another was that the project was more focused on teacher-student-institution-community relations and their socio-political nature, at the expense of exploring the practicalities of teaching for social justice. It was acknowledged that the project resources enabled independent, inquiry-based teaching, and the aim was that Advocates would be in a position to share resources publicly – again, the additional pressures on Advocates and the team unfortunately made this effort unrealistic. As the quote below reflects, there was also a concern that the project involved a "bubble of like-minded people." This is a concern, not least because the Project Advocates and wider HE academics in Ireland were/are not representative of Irish society, which has consequences in terms of understanding and meaningfully responding to, the stakes of students' lived, everyday experiences of, e.g., race/ethnicity, social class and disability inequalities. These issues are partially reflected in the quote below:

I thought it was going to be more practically based. What I was really looking for as an educator and as a kind of a newbie in this space, was something that I could use practically in a session with students. So things like lesson plans or case studies, or face-to-face narratives, you know, or interviews with people. Things that I could use as a mirror or use as a visual aid to root somebody in an issue. You know, that they immediately went "oh, yeah okay, I know what you're talking about there". So I did find all the resources and the articles and to see a lot of colleagues work in that space was wonderful, and I'm using them now and I used them throughout the project, as kind of keystones for lectures and discussions and group work... I did feel that I was slightly, discussing things again, in a kind of a bubble, a bubble of like-minded people, you know. And I have to get myself out of that bubble and more on the ground talking to people... I think we all understand the issues that people are facing, and there's been countless pieces of research around that, but the action that we're taking to address these issues, I still feel I'm not doing enough in that (regard) (Interview 8).

It is clear that the changes and issues discussed above were quite modest in comparison to the multiple challenges posed to social justice education in HE generally. We know from the literature that in order for such adaptations to stay, progress and deepen into something transformative, they form part of a lifelong commitment to critically and reflexively teaching about, inquiring into and acting on social justice concerns that is institutionally supported. But often Advocates regarded the infrastructure needed to sustain this

commitment as lacking. From the point of view of HE teacher professional and personal learning, there was a call to create more opportunities for reflective, interdisciplinary and interinstitutional spaces of this nature. For some who had completed teacher education courses in HE, the project highlighted a gap in existing courses on addressing very real equity and social justice issues in their classrooms and institutions.

The working environment that is working in academia is so all consuming... People wanted to take part in this project. People could see the value in this project. And people were willing to take on the extra work that might've come with a project like this. But it's just so difficult to do it and to have no concession on the kind of the other side... I felt like I couldn't give it my best you know. And really I hate that like because when I do something I want to give it my best... I completed the (local HE institution) Teaching and Learning Certificate... there was good parts to it and everything. But yea I mean it doesn't have any sort of critical edge... So you know you could see how something like the Teaching and Learning Cert could benefit from... something like the DISCs project. (Interview 4)

I did the (local HE institution) Certificate in Teaching and Learning... There was no social justice pedagogy in all of that. It was all about Howard Gardner and ways of learning, which belongs in there. But there was no mention of power or power relationships. There was no mention of the post-colonial roles of universities. (Interview 12)

In my 18 years of teaching in multilingual, multi, you know, diverse classrooms, never had any training on (equity issues in classrooms). I feel a complete hypocrite when I'm working in this system. You're saying to the students "question, question, question" but yet we can't question the system, the foundations that we're working in. (Interview 16)

Many others commented on a variety of institutional barriers (workload, resources, job security, tokenism towards social justice) to progressing their practice which they felt are not meaningfully addressed.

I don't think we have the time that we need to do this properly... when I taught in the US system I'd have three two-hour classes a week, where I would now have one (hour) at a push you know... not only does that limit what you can cover but it also is quite limiting in terms of how you can cover it as well... It's difficult to always find time to dedicate to stuff like this in the way you might wish to... I think that's a problem that existed already that was exacerbated by the pandemic rather than being caused by it... you can't teach for social justice (when) inherently you are in an unjust system right? Not in any meaningful or sustained way. But I think the peer supports such as its been in this project has been great. (Interview 17)

It's impossible to do as good a job as you would like to do, and it's just not recognised.... I would hate to see this (project) turn into a few publications and a report gathering dust. I would really like to see the project used to leverage a little bit of influence around, what is the purpose of higher education? (Interview 11)

But there was also a desire on the part of some to exercise greater educator collective agency - for some, to confront unreasonably challenging institutional conditions and to work with communities and raise challenges about university values in the public domain. For many others, there was a desire to collaborate internally more across disciplines on practices, and to share ideas regarding teaching for social justice.

You know we all moan about it, or we moan about workload, or whatever. But like many other sectors in society I think we don't organise, or we don't engage in acts of solidarity as previous generations might. And we aren't making a case to, outside of the university; to society that actually we are contributing to you know the stratification of society. Of the construction of inequality in society, because of course we only want kids who get certain points. (Interview 1)

I do think there is lacking, nationally as well as in education and universities, that national conversation about who we are and what we stand for and what being part of society, still hasn't really been teased through....I really think they need to balance research evidence, statistics, surveys, legislation and otherwise with guest speakers, people on the ground, community groups, movements, representatives and advocates for certain areas... I worry about the linear kind of small-scale funding that happens. I wonder how effective the mainstreaming of these programmes are. I wonder about the impact of these actions in third level on society as a whole and how it's actually represented to people who are outside of third level or maybe have not even been able to see an option to educating themselves further in whatever position they're in. (Interview 8)

Engagement and across disciplines actually has been really useful because you know, us (disciplinary academics), we think we're all very... I think we all think the same. We should be talking to other people who think differently... And the engagement with other academics or like a platform. So some thing or forum or monthly meeting or something where you could go and hear a little bit more about what people are doing in this space. Because it's really great to learn from others. (Interview 10)

So far, we have presented a range of issues facing staff, students and institutions in relation to teaching for social justice in HE. Our *Development of Teaching for Social Justice in the Irish Higher Education Sector* document offers recommendations for strategy and planning at policy and institutional level. The rest of the current document offers guidance to staff in higher education settings on engaging and teaching in ways that support social justice goals in the classroom. The focus is on developing 'good' teaching practices and strong relationships, with a view to creating inclusive and equitable environments in which students of all backgrounds – particularly those who face systemic inequalities - are welcomed and equally engaged. However, as discussed throughout the above, it must be recognised that strong classroom practices cannot be successfully embedded without meaningful change at government policy, HE sector and institutional level. Furthermore, such changes cannot last at individual level without deepening of one's critical consciousness towards social justice, including consciousness of the power relationships and inequalities behind how knowledge in our disciplines is produced⁹. The DISCs website has a list of readings which we encourage practitioners to engage in as part of the development of such a critical consciousness building. Overall, we encourage practitioners to develop, or continue developing this critical consciousness, and to collectively advocate for wider changes alongside efforts to change individual teaching approaches.

9 Leonardo, Z. (2020) *Edward Said and Education*. London: Routledge.

Practitioner Guidance on Teaching for Social Justice in Higher Education

This guide is presented under four central themes:

1. Reflecting on your worldview and stance on higher education (HE)
2. Engaging with students inside and outside of the classroom
3. Teaching about/responding to sensitive issues in the class setting, and
4. Inclusive assessment practices.

1. Reflecting on your worldview and stance on HE

Worldviews denote people's perceptions of how the world works and reflect their cultural upbringing and life experiences. They represent an individual's conceptual framework and philosophy of life, reflecting how one is socially, politically, culturally, philosophically, and psychologically shaped. They are manifested in everyday life not only in our assumptions, attitudes, opinions, and conceptions, but also our attributions, decisions, and actions (Chen et al., 2016).

Educators have an obligation to first and foremost recognise how their own worldviews shape their thinking, teaching and stance on HE. They have a responsibility to critically reflect on their potential biases and assumptions in their interactions with students¹⁰. We may believe that we are aware of our prejudices, but we regularly adopt stances that limit the pursuit of egalitarian goals. For example, despite the progress of many social movements, reforms and policy initiatives on gender equity, we regard differences in relation to pay, conditions and recognition as normal, or 'not a gender issue'¹¹. Decades of research have also revealed that educators make decisions that perpetuate racial inequality, reflecting assumptions held within their broader society¹². We know in Ireland that racism is endemic to everyday life and pervasive in Irish society and education¹³.

Self-reflection is a useful way of unearthing one's worldviews and their influence on our practices.

The **DISCs Project Self-Assessment Tool** facilitates such reflection and is available here: <https://discs.ie/>.

- *The self-assessment tool helps users gauge their levels of competence and comfort in the themes of gender-consciousness, interculturalism, and community engagement both in their individual pedagogical practices and wider academic engagements.*
- *The assessment should take approximately 15 minutes to complete, depending on the time needed to contemplate upon the statements posed. The statements encourage reflection on one's stance on a limited range of ethical and political issues regarding social justice and higher education.*
- *On completion of the assessment, useful readings and resources are provided to aid further exploration of the issues at hand. We encourage people to collectively use the self-assessment tool and return to it on a regular (quarterly or termly) basis.*

10 Macqueen, S.E., Reynolds, R. and Ferguson-Patrick, K. (2020) Investigating the cultural competence of preservice teachers: Comparisons and considerations. *Journal of International Social Studies* 10 (1): 113-137.

11 Riegle-Crumb, C. and Humphries, M. (2012) Exploring bias in math teachers' perceptions of students' ability by gender and race/ethnicity. *Gender and Society* 26 (2): 290-322; Lynch, K., Grummell, B. and Devine, D. (2012) *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

12 Starck, J.G., Riddle, T., Sinclair, S. and Warikoo, N. (2020) Teachers are people too: Examining the racial bias of teachers compared to other American adults. *Educational Researcher* 49 (4): 273-284.

13 Bryan, A. (2008) The co-articulation of national identity and interculturalism in the Irish curriculum: educating for democratic citizenship? *London Review of Education* 6(1): 47-58; *Irish Network Against Racism* (2019). Irish Network Against Racism. Available at: <https://inar.ie/racism-in-ireland-today-main-issues/> (Last accessed 15 June 2021); Joseph, E. (2018) Whiteness and racism: Examining the racial order in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Sociology* 26 (1): 46-70; Kitching, K. (2014) *The Politics of Compulsive Education: Racism and Learner-Citizenship*. London: Routledge.

2. Engaging with students inside and outside the classroom

2.1 Planning a diverse, student-centred curriculum

Creating a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable classroom climate requires extensive planning beforehand. Designing a course, pedagogical approach and curriculum content which ensures that all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds are proactively included and engaged is vital. As a starting point, in the planning and design stages of your curriculum content, we advise developing, and sharing a statement (such as the one shown below) which shows your recognition of and commitment to student diversity and an inclusive curriculum.

Deep Engagement with Diversity and Equality: *I consider it my responsibility as an educator to address the learning needs of all the students on this course, particularly those of students who are from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. I will work to present materials that deeply engage diversity: race, colour, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religious beliefs, political stance, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship, or national origin. I also believe that the diversity of student experiences and perspectives is essential to the deepening of knowledge in a course. Any suggestions that you have about other ways to include the value of diversity in this course are welcome.*

As you go about your planning, think about ways in which you can plan your content so that:

- The perspectives and scholarship of diverse groups are included through readings and media clips etc. as appropriate. Excluding diverse perspectives conveys the message that only the experiences and scholarship of certain group(s) are valued.
- Examples and case studies that are reflective of the diverse knowledge, experiences and cultural values of your student body can be utilised.
- Applications and examples that are accessible to students of diverse backgrounds are included.
- A uniform view of knowledge is challenged, and students are encouraged to embrace different experiences, perceptions, and ways of knowing.
- Regions, nations, social groups, policies and individuals are represented in their complexity and diversity, rather than being presented as homogenous, or as entirely negative or positive.

The resources and topics explored in your classrooms should be examined for:

- Bias against particular social groups and world regions.
- Histories that show bias in favour of certain (typically White, European-heritage, male, middle class) social groups.
- How accessible and diverse the recommended materials and texts are. This includes drawing on female-identified, working class and global southern scholars and making use of student knowledge where appropriate.

The following resources should further support these efforts.

<https://discs.ie/resources> suggests several resources on teaching for social justice and equality in higher education.

<https://globalsocialtheory.org/> presents several key concepts studied across higher education disciplines from a global perspective.

<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/decolonising-education-from-theory-to-practice/0/steps/189533> talks about how STEM subjects are colonised. This is part of a free University of Bristol course on decolonising your curriculum.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3234393/> provides strategies for teaching social justice in Health Education.

The following journal article by Sebastianelli et al. (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2020.1798331> presents a tool to develop strategies to integrate social justice into business curricula.

There are also many discipline-focused education journals such as: *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, *Journal of Engineering Education*, *Journal of Chemical Education*, and *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* which provide examples of teaching strategies and syllabi that engage diversity.

2.2 Learning engagement (relationships and pedagogy)

Getting to know students: An important yet often overlooked foundation for building relationships with students is knowing and using students' names appropriately. Names are clearly very personal, and usually bear significant meaning for families and cultural communities¹⁴. The negative impact of mispronouncing or misusing a name is very powerful, with real consequences that can have a lasting impact on student wellbeing and self-perceptions. Kohli and Solórzano (2012) found that students whose names were mispronounced often felt shame, embarrassment and that their name was a burden¹⁵. Educators can/should:

- Schedule time for students to introduce themselves on the first day.
- Adopt a system or technique to assist in name recall (Name shark, Nameorize and Remember Names app are some helpful apps).

Another way of getting to know your students better early in the semester is to have them write a brief autobiography which is linked to the course content. For example, you could ask students to share their early experiences with the subject area. It is crucial to know early on the factors that contribute to student engagement and disengagement. Whilst many students engage fully, some students are faced with multiple pressures and challenges that affect their ability to engage e.g., part- or full-time work, parental or carer responsibilities, some students may very well be unfamiliar with the norms of higher education, whilst others face physical and mental health challenges. This is acknowledged and supported through policy including National HE Access Plans: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Kohli, R. and Solórzano, D. (2012) *Teachers, please learn our names!* Racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15 (4): 441-462

Educator expectations: It's a good idea to clearly share your expectations about the class, their teaching philosophy as well as the nature of the syllabus. Students look to their educators to take responsibility for fostering nurturing and respectful classroom environments¹⁶. Therefore, you need to show that you seek to foster a supportive environment. Request students to confidentially share with you any learning needs and challenges as well as informing them of the specific times in which you are available to meet with them. Also, ask your students at the beginning of the semester to let you know if their attendance, class participation, or their ability to complete an assignment on time will be affected by their observance of religious holidays or practices¹⁷.

A DISCs workshop on approaching the syllabus and setting expectations with students is available here <https://discs.ie/pedagogies-workshop>.

Student prior knowledge: On the first day of class it is also a good idea to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on and share their previous knowledge of the topic as well as what they might like to learn about in your module.

KWL charts which can be accessed here <https://www.pdst.ie/node/961> are a useful instrument to facilitate this process. Further strategies for assessing prior knowledge can be found here https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/HIP_tables.pdf

Inclusive climate: Educators should continuously assess their own behaviour and class dynamics to sustain an inclusive climate. Some questions to reflect on in this regard are:

- Do you and all students use inclusive language? For example, when using personal pronouns, do you use “she” and “they” as well as “he”?
- Do you make more eye contact with some students than others?
- Do you respond differently to students from different backgrounds?
- Do you use sensitive and use appropriate language for various social groups?

Ultimately, respect forms the bedrock for any successful relationship. Culturally competent teaching and learning demands respect for others and allowing every voice to be heard¹⁸, including those whose views and opinions differ from your own.

Accessibility: Part of building and maintaining good relationships with students involves ensuring that the environment is as accessible as possible and offering students multiple ways of engaging. As more students with different experiences, learning needs and abilities enter higher education, a willingness on the part of educators to adapt and change is required.

16 Pierre, D.N. (2017) Broadening understanding: Students' perspectives on respecting all sexual orientations and gender identities in university classrooms. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching* 10: 101-116.

17 Saunders, S. and Kardia, D. (1997) *Creating Inclusive College Classrooms*. Available at: https://crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p3_1 (Last accessed 15 June 2021).

18 Irish, C. and Scrubb, M. (2012) *Five competencies for culturally competent teaching and learning*. Available at: <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/five-competencies-for-culturally-competent-teaching-and-learning/> (Last accessed 16 June 2021).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an effective framework to improve the learning experience of all students. To learn more about UDL click here: <https://www.ahead.ie/udl>.

A report on inclusion of students with disabilities (as well as students from diverse backgrounds) in higher education can also be assessed here: <https://www.ahead.ie/positionpaper>

Teaching methodologies: Your teaching approach contributes to the creation of either a welcoming or inhibiting environment for diverse students.

A DISCs 'Developing Pedagogies' Workshop entitled: 'Ways of Thinking about Pedagogy in Higher Education' can be accessed here: <https://discs.ie/pedagogies-workshop>. This workshop helps consider different ways of thinking about pedagogy in Higher Education (HE) and to critically reflect on own approaches to pedagogy.

We know that lecture-based teaching has been shown to inhibit engagement and learning in university students¹⁹. Listed below are strategies have been proven to increase student engagement and learning:

- Project-based and experiential learning
- Research projects
- Class discussions
- Reflective writing
- Cooperative learning and group projects
- Student presentations
- Using student inquiry to drive learning
- Allowing students to select topics for course content²⁰.

During the teaching process, be it in-person or online, ask yourself how you can ensure that your teaching:

- **Connects ethically with real-life contexts, problems and communities.** This not only ensures that teaching is meaningful to all students but also provides an opportunity to consider scenarios and issues from around the globe, and/or that have an equality dimension. Students come to each lecture and concept with different life experiences and lenses, so making your sessions relevant is critical. Community-based or service learning is an approach that engages external communities in shared exchange on key issues and takes positive social action. For more see: <https://servicelearning.duke.edu/for-faculty/resources/assessment-impact>.
- **Engages diverse fields, disciplines, and paradigms as part of a problem-based approach.** This is about presenting students with issues to explore collectively, rather than giving pre-defined answers, providing students an opportunity to contribute their own knowledge, and giving you the chance to validate diverse students' contributions.
- **Includes activities that promote student interaction, collaboration, and shared reflection.**
- **Avoids advantaging or disadvantaging certain individuals or student groups**

¹⁹ Bathgate, M.E., Aragón, O.R., Cavanagh, A.J., Waterhouse, J.K., Frederick, J. and Graham, M.J. (2019) Perceived supports and evidence-based teaching in college STEM. *International Journal of STEM Education* 6(1): 1-14.

²⁰ Garibay, J. (2015) *Creating a positive classroom climate for diversity*. Available at: <https://equity.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CreatingaPositiveClassroomClimateWeb-2.pdf>

- Facilitates equal and potentially differing levels and types of student participation in the respective learning activities.
- Provides students with a range of learning opportunities that cater to different learning strengths. For ideas, see the AHEAD quiz here: <https://www.ahead.ie/udl-practice>
- Encourages students to relate their learning to personal experience and perspectives and to use their backgrounds as a learning tool.
- Considers the varying levels of proficiency in the language(s) being used and supports the development of students' language skills to meet course requirements.

3. Teaching about/responding to sensitive issues in the class setting

Sensitive issues are bound to arise in every classroom, irrespective of one's discipline. Discussion is widely held to be the pedagogical approach most appropriate to the exploration of controversial issues in the classroom²¹. But this discussion needs to be planned. When working with a particular sensitive topic:

- Anticipate possible student responses and how you might handle opposing and potentially passionate views.
- Plan strategies that provide structure for discussions, encourage respectful expression of views and an openness to listen and learn from others.
- Stereotypes and incorrect assumptions should be respectfully and tactfully challenged. A delicate balance however should be sought between challenging offensive speech and the suppression of free speech.
- Adopt a problem-based approach that will support students in exploring and researching sensitive issues in an evidence-based way.
- Consider your own emotions and your response to emotion in the classroom.

Lee Warren from the Derek Bok Center at Harvard describes how to turn difficult discussions into learning opportunities: https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/catl/wp-content/uploads/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard_University.pdf

Ground rules: All classes should have explicit rules for discussion and interactions. These rules can be created by the group. Establishing agreed upon guidelines/rules at the beginning of the semester is an important aspect of constructive group discussions, particularly for those around sensitive topics. Creating shared ground rules together with students helps everyone to take a positive approach and where appropriate, check their behaviour and that of others.

The principles of a 'brave space' can be used to frame these ground rules²². Brave space principles are synonymous with setting up classroom etiquette and guidelines, but with greater focus on diversity and social justice education. A brave space within a classroom environment contains five main elements:

1. Controversy with civility: Differing views are expected and the source of disagreement and possible solutions are explored.

21 Hand, M. and Levinson, R. (2012) Discussing controversial issues in the classroom. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44 (6): 614-629.

22 Arao, B. and Clemens, K. (2013) 'From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In Landerman, L. (ed.) *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*. Washington: Stylus, pp. 135-150.

2. **Owning intentions and impacts:** Students take responsibility for instances in which the wellbeing of another has been affected, intentionally or not, by their contribution.
3. **Challenge by choice:** Students may step in and out of challenging conversations, but must examine why they may be opting out.
4. **Respect:** Students enquire into what respect looks like and means for different people.
5. **No attacks:** Students agree not to intentionally inflict harm, and accept the distinction between evidence-based critique and personal attack.

The creation of brave spaces carries the risk of discomfort for participants, they however allow for a more enriching and extensive dialogue whilst simultaneously providing tools of support for the most vulnerable in the classroom²³.

Knowing students' views and experiences: It is also helpful to have some relevant understanding of students' views and experiences of the topics that are explored in class. You can:

- Use anonymous tools such as surveys or online bulletin boards to learn more about students' views and experiences on an issue before and after sessions.

Where issues of trauma, violence or conflict are addressed as part of your course, it is particularly important to address, at an early stage, any concerns students may have on such content by:

- Indicating to students that they are welcome to approach you individually on course material that they may be concerned about.
- Working out a set of expectations with the student(s) about how they can engage fully with the course, how you will ensure their inclusion and ensure that relevant supports are available to students following the session.
- Remembering in your own planning to challenge the everyday normalisation of violence (e.g. rape culture, racist microaggressions) and being conscious that historic violence (e.g., ethnic cleansing) will affect future generations.

For further guidelines for discussing difficult or high-stake topics see: <https://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>.

A resource for engaging controversial issues in the citizenship classroom is available here: https://learning.educatetogether.ie/pluginfile.php/23803/mod_resource/content/2/Tackling%20Controversial%20Issues.pdf.

Introducing the topic: Finding different ways to introduce an issue is important to including different students from the outset, and certain methods, if adopted in a critical and careful way, may also enhance their capacity to empathise around or relate to the particular issue. Suggested methodologies are listed below:

- **Narrative:** Read or tell a story that grounds the issue/places it in context.
- **Experiential:** Draw on people's life experiences ethically, in a structured learning process – inviting communities to speak for themselves is important here.
- **Logical-quantitative:** Use measurement to provide data, identify cause and effect relationships.
- **Foundational:** Ask big questions about life and our place in the world.
- **Aesthetic:** Use appropriate images, visualisation, objects, audio or trips to specific places.

²³ Ali, D. (2017) *Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals*. NASPA. Available at: https://www.naspa.org/files/dmfile/Policy_and_Practice_No_2_Safe_Brave_Spaces.pdf (Last accessed 6 June 2021).

4. Inclusive assessment practices

Assessment is not only a powerful driver of student learning but also has the potential to drive a commitment for greater social justice within and through higher education²⁴. Assessment, however, has also been identified as one of the most pervasive educational practices conducive to the unequal treatment of students, particularly those with differing social backgrounds²⁵. Students from minority backgrounds often report that staff have low expectations of them, and that educators do not understand that they may have different experiences and cultural repertoires to their majority/White counterparts. This problem is compounded by the use of a single method to assess all students which is culturally biased towards majority experiences and viewpoints. The adoption of flexible, inclusive assessment design principles leads to a more equitable academic experience for all students, irrespective of their background. Below are some broad guidelines which capture most aspects of inclusive assessment.

Inclusive Assessment Design

- ***Anticipate student diversity*** - planning for a broad range of students using a UDL approach from the outset reduces the need for special arrangements further in the course or for students to be unfairly disadvantaged.
- ***Provide flexibility and diversity*** - Include a range of assessment tasks and consider introducing a choice when appropriate.
- ***Requirements should be explicitly stated in the course outline*** - this enables students to evaluate their ability to undertake the course.
- ***Enable diverse perspectives*** - encourage students to draw from their personal experience and backgrounds when undertaking assessment tasks.
- ***Develop the assessment literacy of students*** - many students need additional instruction in assessment practices and expectations. For example, the educator should clearly identify key ideas in specific assessments and ensure that assignment briefs are comprehensive and clearly outline the learning outcomes and success criteria.
- ***Provide timely and dynamic formative and summative modes of feedback to support learning and growth.***
- ***Utilise multiple and varied methods of student evaluation, e.g.:***
 - » Digital story – reflecting the goal of the course
 - » Short Play/dialogue – on a topic of significance
 - » Create and deliver poster or PowerPoint presentations
 - » Verbal exam
 - » Action oriented project reflective of course goals/aims
 - » Test/quiz questions are generated by students
 - » Double entry journals (entry 1: the idea/ entry 2: personal significance of the idea)
 - » Audio protocol – record students talking through the process of solving a problem or answering a question
- ***Have high expectations for ALL students***
 - » Provide models of exemplary/excellent work
 - » Provide a checklist of criteria against which students' work will be evaluated

24 McArthur, J. (2016) Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 41 (7): 967-981.

25 Autin, F., Batruch, A. and Butera, F. (2015) Social justice in education: how the function of selection in educational institutions predicts support for (non)egalitarian assessment practices. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6: 707.

- **Include a balanced blend of qualitative and quantitative assessment**
 - » In mathematical based courses – ask students to describe how they would solve a problem as opposed to just writing the solution
 - » Essay tests- provide a workable balance between the qualitative and quantitative and help assess whether a student has a deep understanding of the material and can reorganise and reapply it²⁶.

For additional strategies on inclusive assessment click on the link below https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/upload-files/assess-inclusively_1.pdf.

Further guidelines on inclusive assessment can be accessed here <https://www.tcd.ie/disability/teaching-info/TIC/good-teaching/assessment.php>. <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/staff/human-resources/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/guides-to-support-inclusive-teaching-and-learning/inclusive-assessment/>

To explore further how university educators in different disciplines use innovative assessment approaches to measure the learning progress of their students click here https://www.queensu.ca/teachingandlearning/modules/assessments/31_s4_01_intro_section.html

²⁶ Qualters, D. (2016) *Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom*. Available at: <https://provost.tufts.edu/celt/files/Diversity-and-Inclusion-Report.pdf> (Last accessed 3 June 2021); Burich, G., and Martin, L. (2004) *Educational Assessment for the Elementary and Middle School Classroom*, 2nd ed. New Jersey Columbus.

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