

Potential Missteps Concerning Student Identity in Discussion Leadership Implications for Teaching and Learning

Student diversity enhances learning and can present both challenges and opportunities for discussion leadership. Some of these challenges and opportunities relate to identities that may be visible (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) or invisible (e.g., sexual orientation, socio-economic status, political and religious affiliation, veteran status). This document addresses some missteps that students and faculty have observed in various classroom environments.

Misstep 1: Generalizing about students based on their group membership

For example, using differential call patterns or making comments that suggest that students with military experience are tough, engineering students like to do numbers, or female students are into fashion.

Suggestion: Drawing on student experiences can greatly enrich the class discussion as long as instructors avoid generalizations about students based on their identities.

Misstep 2: Asking a student to speak for an entire demographic group

For example, calling on a French student for the French or European perspective or cold calling a Black student to speak to a race-related issue.

Suggestions: Include in the conversation students from both within and outside of the demographic group under discussion, with an explicit understanding that none of these students' perspectives are necessarily representative of their entire demographic group. If faced with multiple instances in which specific demographic groups are being discussed, use varied approaches to calling patterns (e.g., don't always begin by calling on a member of the demographic group in question). In discussions of sensitive topics, you may wish to call more than once on students showing passion. It may be, for example, that during discussions of race, you may wish to call more than once on students of color who have their hands up multiple times, while being careful not to cold call them.

Misstep 3: Unintentionally marginalizing students with invisible identities, perspectives, and experiences

For example, using language that implicitly holds as a norm heterosexuality, Democratic Party affiliation, high socioeconomic status, or assumes drinking alcohol during social events.

Suggestions: Use neutral references (e.g., "partner," "spouse"), avoid in-group/out-group comments (e.g., "those people" or "people like us"). Avoid statements that presume everyone has the same identities, perspectives, and experiences, such as making comments that are politically partisan, assume ability (e.g. "just like riding a bike"), or religiously exclusive (e.g., "enjoy your Christmas break").

Misstep 4: Challenging students differentially based on their demographic group

For example, disproportionately calling on male students to perform quantitative analyses or female students to discuss work-life balance or shopping.

Suggestions: Probe student comments, engage students in tough role plays, and pose difficult questions to all students, irrespective of gender, race, or English Second Language status, to provide them with equal opportunity for development.

Misstep 5: Using non-universal references.

For example, frequently using US-centric or sports references to illustrate a point (essentially establishing the US or sports as universal references).

Suggestions: Use analogies that are broadly accessible to make all students feel included in the discussion. Include references to non-US contexts.

Misstep 6: Assuming that students are comfortable revealing their invisible identities in the classroom

For example, students may reveal their sexual orientation, a history of mental or physical disability, veteran status, political or religious affiliation to an instructor or a few sectionmates but not to the entire class.

Suggestions: Be mindful of unintentionally disclosing private information about students. If a student raises his/her/their hand during a class discussion relevant to such private information—and you call on that student—do not specify the reason for doing so.

Misstep 7: Assuming that a student belongs to a particular demographic group based on the student's appearance

For example, inferring that a student grew up in Asia because the student looks Asian or assuming that all South-Asian students are from India or are Indian-American.

Suggestions: Ask whether anyone with the experience in a particular area would like to share it with the class. Use the information on classcards to learn about student backgrounds.

Misstep 8: Mispronouncing student names or misgendering students

For example, mispronouncing or avoiding pronouncing a student's name, not using a student's preferred name or pronouns when calling on students to participate or when referring to their comments.

Suggestions: Carefully review pronunciations by clicking on the speaker icon on each student classcard. If necessary, ask your Section Chair for guidance on identifying or pronouncing challenging names. Carefully review students' pronouns and preferred names on their classcards.

Announce on the first day of class that you want to make sure to pronounce everyone's name correctly and use their correct pronouns. Encourage students to let you know if you are mispronouncing their name, using the wrong name or wrong pronouns. Reach out directly to students whose names you find difficult to pronounce and ask for guidance.

Misstep 9: Reserving discussions of issues related to diversity primarily to female and/or minority protagonists

For example, only using a case with a female protagonist to discuss gender discrimination at work or work/life challenges, which may signal that these issues are relevant only to women or minorities and/or reduce the protagonist to a single social identity.

Suggestion: Discuss issues related to social identities across cases, regardless of the protagonist's demographic group (e.g., "Would the protagonist's actions be perceived differently if he were a woman or a racial or sexual-orientation minority?") Note: Ask such questions only if you are able to allocate sufficient time to discuss and draw meaningful takeaways from these discussions.