Creating Inclusive Course Assignments

When designing assignments, many instructors have their "default" assignment types, such as essays, collaborative projects, presentations, exams, etc. Without careful reflection, we may inadvertently develop assignments that privilege one set of abilities or perspectives over others. For instance, a student with a social anxiety disorder may find his inability to perform live presentations inhibits his ability to demonstrate his mastery over the course content. Or a student who is still learning English may struggle with timed exams because of her language skills, not because of her understanding of course concepts.

One key aspect of creating inclusive courses is designing inclusive assignments that empower all students to learn and succeed equitably, regardless of abilities, cultural backgrounds, or social identities. Below are a few tips for designing more inclusive assignments.

- **Allow students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways**. This might include varying assignment types to balance individual and collaborative tasks or written and oral tasks. Or, it might include allowing students to choose how they will demonstrate their learning and achievement of assignment objectives. For instance, instead of assigning a synthesis *paper*, consider allowing students to choose the kind of product they use to demonstrate the ability to synthesize course information (e.g., a paper, a presentation, a short video, a website). Agency of this sort allows students to work from their individual strengths. While this is important for all students, it is especially helpful for students with disabilities, students who may still be learning English, and others. Note: allowing students to choose does not work for all courses, particularly if course goals include specific kinds of performance (e.g., written work for a writing course).

- **Make assessment criteria transparent from the outset**. To ensure all students can succeed on a given assignment, communicate specific assessment criteria when the assignment is given. This might be done in a rubric, a description of successful versions of the assignment, and/or through other Transparent Assignment Design strategies. You might even include students in the process of developing the criteria, inviting students to collaboratively generate descriptions of what a successful performance on the assignment would look like.

- **Encourage students to explore topics from their own identity perspectives**. This might include inviting students to critique the current literature in your field for biases of a particular sort. Or it might include inviting students to respond to course readings from their own personal experiences.

- **Assign group projects – and ensure that leadership roles rotate**. Collaborative projects can provide an opportunity for students to see the importance of diverse perspectives on a given topic. Structuring group work so that each member of the group has a clear role – and so that leadership roles within the group rotate – will ensure that all students share equitably in the group's success and that no single member of the group always is in the leadership role.

Resources

Inoue, A.B. and Poe, M. (2012). Race and Writing Assessment. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Samuels, D.R. (2014). The Culturally Inclusive Educator. New York: Teachers College Press.

Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.