Teaching for equity and inclusion in the community college world language classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of student-centered and social justice-based teaching methods that promote a classroom atmosphere of equity, inclusion, and positivity by prioritizing students' emotional and psychological well-being in relation to the course content. This paper argues that creating a classroom atmosphere in which students feel safe and included lowers the collective affective filter and establishes a positive relationship with the target language(s), increasing students' linguistic competence. This, in turn, benefits our programs by encouraging students to continue in the language sequence(s), and in higher education in general. The methodologies explored here are holistic pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and constructivist pedagogy—instructional models that embed support and flexibility into courses to enhance social-emotional learning, in addition to academic growth, by acknowledging and addressing the unique and diverse background, strengths, and needs of each student. This paper will give several examples of these student-centered pedagogical practices in the community college context.

Keywords:

constructivist pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, educational equity, holistic pedagogy, inclusive learning, social-emotional learning, student-centered teaching

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This paper is dedicated to Greg Biondi, M.Ed., who has always taught by example the meaning of caring about students, and whose humanity and compassion toward students is an inspiration.

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In recent years, community college demographics have become more diverse and attending community colleges before transferring to four-year higher education institutions has become increasingly common. With these changes, students' choice to attend community college must also become destigmatized and recognized as an option that is elected for financial and practical reasons rather than as a result of academic shortcomings. Studies show that on average, seventy-five percent of community college students in the northeastern United States remain in college between their first and second years. Nearly fifty percent of community college students graduate with Associates degrees and go on to four-year institutions—sometimes even Ivy League institutions—to earn bachelor's degrees and beyond. These statistics prove that many students complete their first two years of higher education at community colleges due to factors such as financial strain, underprivileged backgrounds, excessive outside responsibilities, and a general unfamiliarity with the university system, often as a result of an immigrant or English-Language-Learner (ELL) status. These data also reinforce the fact that students' choice to attend community college is rarely based on academic deficiency but rather on less privileged circumstances than those of the average American college student. It is important to note that community college students are rarely those whose families pay for their tuition, expensive school supplies, such as laptops, or transportation to and from campus. These are students whose families often need the students' help to remain financially stable, placing stresses and responsibilities on the students that far exceed those of a "traditional" American university student.

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According to Love (2021), "we need to validate community college as a real, authentic, pathway to higher education, not treat it as a stomping ground for the undesirable. It is the job of the college to provide direct pathways to four year institutions." This may seem like administrative work but valuing the students that come to two-year colleges and making them feel worthy of being in higher education begins in the classroom. As language professors, whose personal backgrounds and course content arguably contain one of the largest components of humanity of any discipline, we possess the unique capacity to tap into a genuine compassion and empathy for our students and to create a classroom space with a sense of community and belonging. We must recognize the responsibility that we have to do so and adapt our teaching to the needs of our student demographic. In this way, we can set an example to other disciplines, and even to our administrators.

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We can create a safe, equitable, and inclusive classroom space in several ways, which will be explored here. First, we can simply check the way in which we approach, speak to, correct, and grade students, making sure that each student is treated equally, regardless of her/his background or circumstances. We can also be mindful of the way in which we offer feedback to students—both in-class and on graded assignments—being sure that it is done with compassion and encouragement, rather than severity, so that students do not lose morale. Furthermore, we must represent and validate each student's identity and background in our curriculum by creating course materials that are

inclusive and representative of each student's ethnicity, religion, linguistic background, self-identification, physical and intellectual ability, and socio-economic status. These steps not only ensure students' comfort and well-being in the classroom but can also affect retention by playing a large role in their decision whether to remain in college after the first semester.

The Community College Demographic

A recent study on New Jersey community college demographics provides the statistics that approximately 49% of our students are experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity at [a given] time (homelessness, food insecurity or housing insecurity)—33% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, 35% of respondents experienced housing insecurity in the previous year, [and] 11% of respondents experienced homelessness in the previous year. Moreover, 34% of survey respondents cannot afford to eat balanced meals and 31% worry about running out of food before they have money to buy more (Hope Center Research Team, 2020).

These statistics are already striking, but even more so is the news that "in comparison to the rates for all survey respondents at two-year institutions nationwide in 2019, [the colleges in this study have] a lower rate of food insecurity, a lower rate of housing insecurity, and a lower rate of homelessness" (Hope Center Research Team, 2020). This means that on average, community college students nationally experience even greater hardship than that which was reported in this study. It is also common for most community college students to work several jobs to support not only themselves but also their families, in addition to taking a full course load.

This is why it is so important to "receive students' distress in a way that meets them where they are, [and] validates what they're going through" (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). In all interactions with students, but especially in cases such as the examples mentioned earlier, it is important to treat students with the deepest possible compassion. We never know what hardships they are enduring outside of school, so it is important to provide them with a safe and positive atmosphere within the classroom. We may not realize that this could be the only safe or positive atmosphere in their current lives.

In fact, "given that emotions and relationships strongly influence learning […], a positive school climate is at the core of a successful education experience. School climate creates the physiological and psychological conditions for productive learning. Without secure relationships and supports […], student engagement and learning are undermined" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). It has in fact been proven that "neurobiologically, students can't learn if they don't feel safe, known, and cared for within their schools" (Aupperle et al., 2012, as cited in Minahan, 2020) because "the brain's capacity develops most fully when […] youth feel emotionally and physically safe" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). These data prove that providing students with a positive, inclusive, and equitable classroom space is not only an admirable endeavor, but one that is supported by the science of human development. Furthermore, the data thoroughly debunk the claim that it is our job only to teach students, but not care about them. If neurobiological studies are proving that part of teaching students is nurturing them, then caring is objectively and scientifically very much part of our job.

It is also the fulfillment of the mission statements of most community colleges, which usually declare commitment to "providing a secure, supportive environment responsive to the needs of students […] regardless of financial, academic, educational or physical challenges" (County College of Morris Mission Statement, 2020). A classroom space must not only feel safe to a select few students, but to all students. For this reason, it is important

to treat each student with equal attention, compassion, and kindness, which will be further explored below.

Equity, Inclusion, and Holistic Pedagogy

Holistic pedagogy, or the whole-student approach, is defined as a teaching methodology that "recognizes the complex interplay between the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning and calls on faculty to address 'the whole student'" (Achieving the Dream Staff, 2021, p. 2). Most world language instructors are likely already implementing this pedagogy precisely because of our acute awareness of factors such as the affective filter—the affective, or emotional factors, such as self-image, or anxiety, that can affect the language learning process and language production in front of peers and native speakers of the target language (Krashen, 1982). Because of our own training in the affective factors involved in language acquisition, we may precede our colleagues in other fields in our realization that students' emotional well-being is the key to their interest and success in our course content and to a positive classroom atmosphere. Our familiarity with factors such as the affective filter, and how these can affect the way in which students absorb and process information, equip us to share with our colleagues who teach other disciplines that students have the best opportunity to learn when the instructor practices inclusion and equity in the classroom, making students feel represented in the curriculum, connected to their peers and the instructor, valid in what they bring with them to the classroom, and important in the learning process.

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The mission statements of several community colleges in the northeastern United States share these ideals. The Raritan Valley Community College Mission Statement (2020) aims to "foster diversity by developing and maintaining curricular and social programs that infuse the contributions of all people, and by preparing students to excel in a global society." The mission statement of County College of Morris (2020) includes three points that go hand in hand with these ideas:

1. Commitment to providing a secure, supportive environment responsive to the needs of students.
2. A commitment to diversity that respects individual differences and upholds the dignity of every person.
3. A commitment to providing access and services to all regardless of financial, academic, educational, or physical challenges.

One of the most basic ways to create a sense of positivity and security in the classroom is to make a conscious effort to treat each student equally. An example may be something as simple as greeting every student in the exact same way when they enter the classroom; greeting students who arrive late in the same way as students who arrive on time or early. It does not disrupt the class to smile and say a friendly *ciao* or *hola* to students who enter after class has begun. In fact, this creates a better classroom environment than the toxic atmosphere that is created by becoming visibly frustrated when students arrive late. At times, the argument that we should be preparing students for "the real world" arises here. To this, Garth-McCullough et al. (2021) question, "are we preparing them for the real world or prison?" What Garth-McCullough et al. of course mean is that the reality, based on the previously cited statistics, is that most community college students do not need a lesson in

responsibility. Most of them are already bearing burdens that people their age should not have and may arrive late due to hardships such as not being able to afford their own vehicle or a reserved parking space. It is more important in these cases to establish a caring and trusting environment for these students by not scolding them or treating them differently when they are late but greeting them with kindness and making them feel as though they are wanted in the classroom. "In schools where students encounter punitive discipline tactics rather than supports for handling adversity, their stress is magnified" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018), also magnifying any behavioral issues related to adversity outside of school. In colleges with underprivileged student demographics, the caring environment, rather than the lesson in responsibility, is what the student needs. "It is important to ensure students have structure and to hold high expectations. But students will fare best if they know their teachers care about their well-being just as much as their behavior and assignment compliance" (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). In fact, "studies have found that a positive school climate improves academic achievement overall and reduces the negative effects of poverty on achievement" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

To maintain equity and impartiality, it is important to keep in mind that "students may not have [equal] access to [materials]. […] They may be forced to work to help their families financially. They may have to look after younger siblings. They may not have a safe place to live off campus" (Head, 2020). If student tardiness to class, late submission of an assignment, or similar occurrences are due to a challenging situation in their home life, we should offer them the same types of accommodations that we would be required to offer students with physical, intellectual and learning disabilities, such as extensions and waived penalties. This type of practice demonstrates fairness and inclusivity in the classroom and goes hand in hand with the idea of not making college an elitist experience, but one that is truly available to all qualified students, regardless of their circumstances. This includes not only treating students of diverse ethnicities, abilities, religions, and gender identifications equally, as we are taught to do in our sensitivity trainings, but also treating students of all cultural-linguistic backgrounds and socio-economic strata equally. This is the equity "regardless of financial, academic, educational or physical challenges" (County College of Morris Mission Statement, 2020), that "values all aspects of diversity including but not limited to race, sexual orientation, religion, age, sex, national origin, disability, socioeconomic status, and political and philosophical perspectives" (Raritan Valley Community College Mission Statement, 2020), to which our colleges' mission statements express a commitment. Anything else would be favoritism, discrimination, and even elitism.

Far too often, "university policies and practices can exacerbate social difficulties that cause structural exclusion: pushing poor [or minoritized] students to the margins, thereby reminding them of their difference—often in ways that connect to racial inequalities on college campuses and in the nation. The cumulative effect is that to disadvantaged students, [the campus] feels like a place that—both intentionally and unintentionally—works against affirming them as full members of the college community" (Jack, 2019, p. 135). If professors attempt to uphold these policies out of "concern for our positions in our colleges, we decenter our students" (Wood, 2021). Moreover, "many institutions of higher education attempt to provide students with tools or strategies to succeed in college but fail to consider the influence that such outside factors as financial means and parental education have on success. This is a mistake. Rather, institutions should consider class-based variables" (Siegel & Ward, 2012, p. 70). If we want to make college accessible to everyone, as is the goal and mission of community colleges, we must treat every student with equal inclusivity. This is certainly not to say that there should be no policies or standards to maintain order but

that we must find a greater flexibility and empathy within the confines of college policy, not only making accommodations for select groups of students, but for all students that find themselves in extenuating circumstances, whether these are physical, intellectual, or learning disabilities, linguistic barriers, systemic exclusion, or socio-economic disadvantage.

Feedback, Error Correction, and the Affective Filter

All instructors and professors have administrative requirements, policies, procedures, and standards to which we are to expect our students to adhere. It is easy for us to allow administrative pressures, or even our own insecurities, to cause us to become overly focused on policies and disciplinary actions, and to become overly corrective in our feedback to students, to demonstrate to administrative supervisors that we ourselves are meeting standards. However, becoming overpowered by policy, procedure, and disciplinary or corrective attitudes toward students can be detrimental to students' psyches, and in turn, to the classroom atmosphere. An overly corrective attitude on the part of the instructor runs the risk of creating a punitive rather than inclusive environment, causing students to feel scrutinized, detached, dehumanized, and unimportant in the learning process. Jack (2019) affirms that "students who do not feel welcome at a college […] tend to underperform and give up more easily" (p. 28). This statement reinforces the ideas that "students will fare best if they know their teachers care about their well-being just as much as their behavior and assignment compliance" (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020), "if we are more worried about our positions than about our students, we will decenter our students" (Wood, 2021), and "students' sense of belonging [affects] all aspects of their college experience" (Jack, 2019, p. 30), including their academic performance and their likelihood to re-enroll in future terms. The type of support and feedback that we offer students truly matters to their psychological motivation to continue, or not, with the language after the first course, and in extreme cases, whether to remain in college. If we can set them up for success rather than failure to begin with by providing them with affirmative supports, their relationship with the target language and with higher education in general will be more positive.

Correction is an integral component in the learning process that helps students stay on track and meet the learning outcomes, however, it must be well thought out and delivered with compassion rather than severity to avoid it damaging students' psyches and causing them to relinquish learning the language prematurely. It is important to offer timely feedback on exams and assignments in a way that makes students feel heard and supported in their efforts, especially in online courses. We must not only be sensitive to students' time expectations, just as we expect them to respect our deadlines, but also offer them feedback during class in a way that raises their confidence and makes them feel supported rather than causing them to feel ashamed or embarrassed of any errors made in front of their peers. Classrooms that allow for maximum language learning to take place are spaces that "affirm [students'] competence, sense of self-worth and feelings of safety" (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). It has in fact been proven that "negative emotions-such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt," which can be caused by improperly delivered corrective feedback, "reduce the capacity of the brain to process information and to learn" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

It is important that corrective feedback be implicit and "unobtrusively provided so as not to disrupt the flow" (Kim, 2003, p. 2) of the student's ideas. "Nativists such as Krashen have dismissed any perceived benefits from corrective feedback based on their belief that prolonged exposure to […] comprehensible input […] is the driving force behind Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Krashen even believes that corrective feedback

is […] potentially harmful, since it interrupts the flow of discourse that could provide comprehensible input" (Kim, 2003, p. 2). Additionally, Krashen (1982) argues that "error correction has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive" (p. 75) and is thus "a serious mistake" (p. 74).

As Krashen warns, the affective and psychological effects of corrective feedback on students must be taken into careful consideration. "Corrective feedback [in the form of explicit error correction] constitutes [a] type of negative feedback" (Ellis, 2009, p. 3). Ur (1996) suggests that "negative assessment is to be avoided as far as possible since it functions as 'punishment' and may inhibit or discourage learning" (p. 203). When employing corrective feedback, instructors must be aware of the necessary balance between "acknowledging the cognitive contribution it can make while also [heeding] warnings about the potential affective damage it can do […]. Teachers should monitor the extent to which corrective feedback causes anxiety in learners and should adapt the strategies they use" (Ellis, 2009, p. 3). Adapting feedback strategies is especially important to consider from a holistic pedagogical perspective, since many students may come from cultures or families in which being corrected is synonymous with failure and can cause previous trauma and psychological damage to resurface.

As affirmed by Ur (1996), corrective feedback is not necessarily synonymous with negative feedback. There are many ways to deliver positive corrective feedback to students. If correction is necessary for comprehension during class, it may be best to offer corrective feedback not in the explicit, "input-providing" form of the "giving the answer strategy," but in the implicit, "output-prompting" form of the "prompting the answer strategy," or "indirect correction." In this implicit corrective feedback style, the instructor poses key questions to guide students to recognize their own error(s) and make the necessary correction(s) themselves. It allows students and their peers to re-evaluate what was said and helps students speaking in class get the sense that they are not being patronized but that the effort in arriving at the correct linguistic structure is collective. A similar corrective scaffold that instructors can offer is "negotiation of meaning," where comprehension gaps are filled by the interlocutor—the instructor or classmates—asking the speaker key questions that help her/him reformulate the original utterance with greater clarity. In cases in which a student seems particularly self-conscious, it may be enough for the instructor to simply paraphrase what the student said, but with the correct grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation, in an effort to acknowledge the correct form without demoralizing the student. Each of these examples of positive corrective feedback and scaffolding offers an opportunity for a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016)—framing errors or difficulty as opportunities to learn rather than as obstacles or failures—and gives the language learning process a participatory and collective component, rather than allowing it to be hierarchical, punitive, or patronizing.

Furthermore, feedback does not need to be corrective at all. Ur (1996) reports that students respond better to positive reinforcement than to any type of corrective feedback. According to Ur (1996), it is more beneficial to students for the instructor to place a greater emphasis on and attribute more explicit praise to what students have uttered correctly than to dwell too much on imperfections in their speech, also keeping in mind the difference between accuracy and fluency (Harmer 1983). While it is our job to point out errors in order to perfect students' oral and written production of the target language, it is equally imperative to their proficiency to offer congratulations and encouragement for what they say and write correctly in the target language. "Assessment should be positive or non-judgmental [in order to] promote a positive self-image of the learner as a person and language learner" (Ur, 1996, p. 203). Moreover, "when giving negative feedback [or making

corrections] teachers can use the positive sandwich approach—starting and ending with a positive comment" (Minahan, 2020) so that the overall message of the feedback comes across as positive and congratulatory, rather than negative or corrective. This practice cultivates a psychologically constructive atmosphere in the classroom by significantly lowering students' affective filters, as well as establishing mutual support among students and a trusting relationship with the instructor. Through a blend of sensitive, implicit correction and positive, encouraging feedback, students become more comfortable making mistakes and find space to grow and improve within what they know to be a supportive classroom community.

Empathetic Grading

Just as a compassionate attitude that takes into consideration students' humanity and emotional well-being is necessary when giving in-class feedback, it is also necessary when grading written assignments and assessments. Sykes (2020) speaks about "human-centered" teaching and research that factors humanity into all academic interactions. She emphasizes the importance of treating our students and colleagues as the humans that they are, rather than being rigid and unrealistic with deadlines and expectations. She argues that too much rigidity damages the human psyche and leads to the mental depletion of the other party. Moreover, she argues that the world languages field is in a position to "set an example of human-centeredness to other disciplines" (Sykes, 2020).

When grading, just as with the other topics already discussed, professors should take into consideration students' humanity—weighing their entire set of circumstances—and be flexible when necessary. This practice is a component of holistic pedagogy. When we speak about maintaining flexibility in grading, it is certainly not to say that there should be favoritism or leniency in grading but that the student's whole story matters in the process of determining such things as whether to accept and/or take off points for late work. Sykes (2020) argues that far too often, "grading is only about compliance. Moving past compliance [such as submitting assignments and assessments on time and in the correct format], shifting focus away from mistakes, and focusing on pointing out what students are doing well helps teachers push students toward proficiency and motivates them to want to do better. It also facilitates self-reflection and self-correction in students."

Here, a greater consideration for the student's circumstances must come into play, remembering that "education transcends test scores and curricular continuity" (Collins, 2020). For instance, a student may live at home to save money and have to share technological resources with parents and siblings or may not have access to a reliable Internet connection or a personal computer due to such issues as the housing insecurity that many community college students face. Especially in times when campuses and facilities that would provide these resources are closed, "traditional grading policies will not be a true gauge of student progress. They will more likely be a reflection of a family's income and resources" (New Jersey Educator's Association [NJEA] Review Staff, 2020). To maintain equity, it may be necessary to allow students with extenuating socio-economic circumstances extra time—within reason—to submit online assessments and assignments without penalty. This is not dissimilar to the accommodations that we are required by our colleges to make for students with physical, intellectual, and learning disabilities.

We must maintain the perspective that students may not only lack technological resources but also "may lack access to a quiet and supportive environment" (NJEA Review Staff, 2020) in which to study. Some first-generation college students may even be faced with "parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience with college or understanding

of its benefits [and] may not be supportive of a student's decision to go" (Siegel & Ward, 2012, p. 73). These students may be "criticized for devoting time to school rather than to family responsibilities" (Siegel & Ward, 2012, p. 73). Such cases are in fact quite common in community colleges where many students are economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students, or both. Thus, it is important to view students through a holistic lens, see students' entire set of circumstances, and preserve a flexible and supportive attitude toward all students. "It would be unethical to maintain […] policies and practices" (NJEA Review Staff, 2020) that cause us to ignore the extremity of some students' realities. "Integrating empathy and compassion into our courses is […] a critical part of the work we must do" (Head, 2020) and can begin with the way in which we offer feedback and distribute grades.

Validating What Students Bring: Constructivist and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Siegel and Ward (2012) pose the questions, "How [can] faculty and staff validate […] students' experiences and the attributes they bring to the institution? How do we create environments that engage […] students intentionally and frequently? How do we create […] learning opportunities that […] have a welcoming presence that mitigates […] students' fear of engagement?" (pp. 69-70). Perhaps students' sense of belonging, community, or validation begins in each individual classroom, giving professors a greater responsibility than they may realize in student morale, and in turn, academic success, and retention.

Studies show that "the elements of school climate contributing most to increased achievement are associated with teacher-student relationships, including warmth, acceptance, and teacher support" (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Moreover, Field (2020) affirms that "decades of research show that relationships with professors play a key role in students' retention." Siegel and Ward (2012) argue that "the degree to which students feel they fit into the fabric of the institution is a crucial component of their decision to stay or leave when they are faced with vexing challenges […and] students who drop out of college often indicate the feeling that they do not belong at the institution" (p. 75). If a student "decides to stay or leave largely based on his or her [level of] integration into the academic and social life of the campus, […] intentional efforts designed to create a […] safe space for students are imperative" (p. 80). Jack (2019) echoes that "to provide more effective help for the most disadvantaged undergraduates, colleges need to take into account the diversity of cultural resources they bring with them to campus" (p. 128).

Integrating students' backgrounds and home cultures into classroom and campus life is linked to constructivist and culturally responsive pedagogy. These teaching methodologies acknowledge that "students bring [valid and useful] pre-existing knowledge and attitudes with them" to the campus and to the classroom and "emphasize the social capital and cultural knowledge that diverse students bring to the learning experience [to prioritize] the message that everyone can learn and succeed" (Achieving the Dream Staff, 2021, p. 2). CdeBaca-Cruz (2021) reiterates that we must "get away from deficit views of students' cultures and rather incorporate their home cultures into the learning environment."

Keeping the characteristics of constructivist and culturally responsive pedagogy in mind, we can go even further than to practice the previously discussed compassionate attitude, implicit feedback, and empathetic grading to help students succeed. We can tailor our course materials and supplementary resources to help students feel included and represented in the curriculum. Burkett and Sherrow (2019) describe that "you're not the problem for not being represented in the curriculum; the curriculum is the problem for not representing you." Noguera (2021) adds that "in order to engage students of color, teachers

must adapt their teaching to the way in which those students learn rather than the reverse." A significant component to an inclusive and social justice-driven classroom is to ensure that all religions, ethnicities, family types, gender identifications, socio-economic strata, and abilities are represented in the materials that we use to teach our target languages. Glynn, Wesley, and Wassel (2014), describe that "social justice […] may very well be as simple, yet profound, as incorporating marginalized voices into the classroom space" (p. 34). They sustain that representing your students also extends to classroom procedures and activities. For example, if most exams of cultural products, practices, and perspectives are Eurocentric or only representative of able-bodied people, the topics will have less meaning and relevancy for students of color or students with disabilities. Including themes and activities that represent students' interests, abilities, and backgrounds is a principal method of affirming your students' identities. (p. 33) Examples of such affirmations of all students' identities could be endless. Some possible strategies that could be implemented in world language classrooms are discussed below.

Identity-Affirming Pedagogical Practices

One way to make students feel valued and included starting on the first day of an introductory world language course is to ask them to share words in the target language that they already know. In the cases of Spanish and Italian in particular, students often come to us with a significant amount of prior knowledge. This activity proves to students that the professor values and acknowledges what they bring. Even if students' shared words or phrases are dialectical or mispronounced, this activity establishes self-confidence for students, especially heritage language learners, by proving to them that they are all showing up with some legitimate prior knowledge of the subject and sets the tone for the rest of the semester that any contribution they make in class is heard and is valid. Instead of focusing on how their shared words that day may not be uttered in the standard variety of the language or pronounced perfectly, the instructor can, while still correcting those things, emphasize how much knowledge students are bringing into the class.

As we more frequently find students of diverse linguistic backgrounds in our language courses, a major way to validate their linguistic identity is to acknowledge that the target language of the classroom may not always contain a cultural equivalent of all words in a students' native language. In these cases, we can avoid cultural appropriation of students' first language (L1) and allow students to preserve the cultural autonomy of their home languages by permitting the use of the native language when there is no cultural equivalent in the target language. García and Solorza (2020) share an example of this practice with the words *dough* and *masa*.

> Recently a fourth grade bilingual Latinx student in a classroom that García was observing did not comprehend the phrase in a practice test: "She worked all day preparing the dough." But when the Latina teacher paraphrased it as, "She worked all day preparing the masa," her face lit up! She knew about masa to make tortillas, something her mother prepared often, although her mother never used dough to make cookies. When Latinx authors use words such as "masa" when writing in English, educators often say they are "code-switching" into Spanish, viewing English and Spanish as separate autonomous languages. But for Latinx bilingual children, even for those rendered proficient in English according to school records, "masa" is simply a word from their repertoire. (p. 10)

Allowing students to use words "from their repertoire" at all levels validates both them and their native languages. Although this example comes from a K-12 environment, it can be

applied to the college level and can take place in any world language or English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

From a multilingual education perspective, we should always allow students to use their knowledge of grammar, morphology, and lexicology in their first or second language (L1/L2) to bolster their learning of the target language, rather than expect them to suppress their existing linguistic knowledge to learn the target language. This is especially true in 100-level courses, in which full immersion cannot yet be expected, and in cases in which the students' known languages are particularly like the target language, as in the case of bilingual Spanish and English speakers learning a new Romance language.

There are many arguments for this type of multilingual education at the high-school level and in higher education. The shift from the full-immersion mentality in 100-level courses is largely viewed by professors and researchers as a positive evolution that "transcends our more narrowly defined initial approach" (Muller, 2015, p. 185), "distances itself from the classic division 'one course=one language'" (Bonvino, 2015, p. 36), and allows students, "no longer confined by imposed hierarchies of the 'ideal' speaker [to] establish a friendly relationship with languages, rather than a punitive one" (Donato et al., 2019, p. 3).

Moreover, this is yet another example of allowing students to use elements from their own "repertoire" in a constructive and culturally-affirming way and viewing students' pre-existing skill sets through an additive lens as academic assets, rather than treating the skills that students bring to the classroom as deficiencies. As discussed previously, it is in fact true that the college system risks upholding inequity as well as class and race divides. Practices such as strict adherence to a full-immersion rule in introductory language courses without allowing students to use their home languages (i.e., Spanish, Arabic) to help them learn the target language (i.e., Italian, French) risk becoming Eurocentric because they minoritize students' native languages (García & Solorza, 2020). The methodology described above is thus not only an effective teaching practice, but a true practice of equity to allow space for students' native languages in the world languages classroom.

Another practice of inclusion in a Spanish class—although this example could translate to any world language—is simply writing words such as *mezquita* [mosque] and *sinagoga* [synagogue] on the board, and presenting different places and styles of religious worship in authentic videos in the target language, when the textbook only teaches the vocabulary word, *iglesia* [church] in the unit on religion. A similar example, translatable to other Romance languages, could be adding nationalities to the limited list in the textbooks that students use with the verb *ser* [to be] to describe themselves and others, and depicting individuals of various ethnic origins speaking in the target language and living in the countries where the target language is spoken. This exercise could then lead to an in-depth unit on various diasporas in different historical periods.

A further practice that can take place when teaching adjectives in level-one courses is to add adjectives surrounding mental health and mental illness, so that students experiencing these conditions feel as though they have the vocabulary in the target language to describe their authentic emotions and can gain the sense that the space is inclusive of them, rather than feeling even more isolated and excluded than they likely already do. Examples of this practice in an Italian course could be to add adjectives such as *depresso/a* [depressed] and *ansioso/a* [anxious] to the limited list of emotions such as *contento/a* [happy] and *triste* [sad] that the textbooks provide. This could be a good supplement to including images and videos of individuals of a varying physical, intellectual, and learning abilities to the course curriculum.

Further examples of original supplementary handouts to substitute for less inclusive textbook activities are as follows. In introductory Romance language courses, it may help

students feel more included for the instructor to provide them with images of blended and non-traditional families to describe instead of only using the "traditional" family photos in the textbooks to practice family vocabulary and possessive adjectives. Similarly, in second-semester Romance language courses, in which students are often asked to describe couples to practice grammar points such as reciprocal action verbs, we may opt to project onto the screen images of same gender and interracial couples as options for students to describe instead of only offering the option of describing the opposite gender, non-interracial couple that the textbooks often provide with this activity, still giving students the option of using the textbook photo if they prefer to do so. This not only fulfills our colleges' mission statements that strive for inclusivity and equity, but based on student feedback and evaluations, the student response to this in the author's own courses has been overwhelmingly positive, especially for students who do live "non- traditional" realities, whether in their family life, their self-identification, or their choice of partner. As a result of these more inclusive activities, particularly LGBTQ+ students have opened up and felt comfortable being themselves in front of their classmates, who, as far as has been observed, have offered them full acceptance and support. It is incredible how something so seemingly simple as the choice of image for open descriptions in the target language can transform the classroom into such a safe space where this type of openness can take place.

Another way to help LGBTQ+ students feel represented in the curriculum, as well as educating all students on LGBTQ+ sensitivity, is to teach inclusive adjective endings and gender-neutral pronouns in our target languages. Parodi-Brown (2019) argues the importance of teaching gender-neutral noun and adjective endings in Spanish, such as 'x', 'e', and '@', using common examples such as *Latinx*, as well as the gender-neutral pronoun options, such as *elle* [gender-neutral third-person singular subject pronoun] and *elles* [gender-neutral third-person plural subject pronoun]. He reports that students usually accept these forms without hesitation as a way to be inclusive and to respect the preferences of gender non-conforming individuals.

It may be opportune to mention to students that while not all varieties of Spanish have equally adopted these gender-neutral options, the forms are in fact widespread in some of the most prominent Spanish-speaking populations, such as that of the southwestern United States, particularly Southern California, and much of Spain, in spite of the fact that the forms are not yet included in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de Español* [Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish]. This could also be an opportunity to point out to students how often widely-used terms in certain varieties of Spanish do not appear in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de Español*. Parodi-Brown (2019) in fact mentions that it is important that students know the difference between "real Spanish"—that which is actually used in everyday speaking, even if only in certain varieties of the language—and "*Real* Spanish"—that which appears in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de Español* and excludes common phrases of many Central and South American regional varieties of the Spanish language.

In fact, Ramos (2020) argues that the gender-inclusive noun, *Latinx*, creates a space not only for LGBTQ+, non-binary, and gender non-conforming Hispanics, but "for all the people in the Latino community who have ever felt left out […]. That 'x' is simply an invitation for every one of those people that can't fit into one identity, […] that want to challenge norms" (p. 250). The use of *Latinx* instead of *Latino/a* "help[s] *everyone* be seen" (p. 198). By teaching these more inclusive pronoun and adjective forms in Spanish as normal parts of grammar, and equally valid options as the traditional pronouns and adjective endings, we are creating classroom environments where students do feel seen, and where they feel comfortable and safe being themselves.

Words and Actions: Teaching Languages Through the Lens of Social Justice, quoting *Toolkit for the Tongue-Tied,* states that "social emotional learning, respect, and safety are as important as literacy […and] students need to feel both physically and emotionally safe to learn. This includes safety from stereotype, threat, harassment, and exclusion" (Israel, 2014, as cited in Glynn, Wesley, & Wassel, 2014, p. 33). Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) echo that it is imperative to provide "a caring, culturally responsive learning community, in which all students are well-known and valued and are free from social identity or stereotype threats that exacerbate stress and undermine performance." Representing and validating students' backgrounds and identities in the curriculum gives them the message that the course material is accessible to them, to people that look like them, and to people with their linguistic, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background. Finally, Breen (2020) supports these positions in her statement that "fluency waxes and wanes […] I mainly hope that [students] remember to appreciate all kinds of diversity […] and to always respond with kindness, a universal language." If students can begin by cultivating kindness and acceptance toward classmates who may be different than them but with whom they forge bonds over the course of an academic term, they may become more open to displaying these inclusive attitudes toward people of diverse backgrounds on a larger scale.

Recognizing What Students Do Not Bring

A further step that can be taken to protect students from stereotype, exclusion, marginalization, and similar negative experiences, while setting the examples of diversity appreciation and the universal language of kindness, is not only to value what students bring but also to acknowledge what they do not bring with them when they begin college. For instance, many first-generation college students may be unfamiliar with academic settings and the unspoken etiquette and protocol that accompanies these environments. International students and English Language Learners (ELLs) may lack knowledge of the American university system in addition to struggling with a potential language barrier. Students beginning college may also lack knowledge of the vocabulary we use to describe college practices, such as "office hours" and "academic integrity."

This is highlighted by Jack (2019), who explains that the fact that some students do not even know what office hours are "represents more than just a simple miscommunication [and is] a roadblock to inclusion and belonging, one that impedes access to places where connections are made, bonds are forged, and information is shared" (p. 93). One of Jack's interviewees explains that many first-year students do not even realize that they are allowed to advocate for themselves or go to office hours for extra help, giving the example of one student who states that, "when you're poor and you're homeless, you get used to taking what is given" (Jack, 2019, p. 93). Because of this mindset and a general lack of preparation for college life, Jack (2019) reports that some of the neediest students feel "guilty asking for extensions" (p. 94) in circumstances so extenuating as homelessness. Another example could be that of the international student who may not only be unfamiliar with the American school system but also may be suffering from a general feeling of isolation and struggling to find a sense of belonging, even outside of the college. This type of student could also come from a background where it is not socially acceptable to advocate for oneself or to share personal circumstances with authority figures.

This lack of self-advocacy on the part of disadvantaged students and students who are unfamiliar with the college system, either as a result of being new to the United States, a first-generation college student, or both, as many of our colleges' ELLs are, results in professors potentially never becoming aware of students' circumstances outside of college.

It is not easy for students to admit that they are struggling with situations beyond college, so we must create a space that allows them to feel more comfortable doing so to ensure that the proper accommodations are made for them. Tragically, Jack's interviewees share that some "professors don't necessarily make it all that easy to meet with them" (Jack, 2019, p. 96), in turn limiting students "from taking advantage of the full range of resources their college offers them" (Jack, 2019, p. 98).

Thus, it is of utmost importance to define academic terms and make students feel welcome in our classrooms and in our syllabi. Only then will they feel as though they are allowed to approach us as understanding, humane listeners and openly describe to us their circumstances, which may merit accommodations of which we would not otherwise be aware. In order to accomplish this, we must equally recognize and value what students bring and do not bring with them to campus so that we do not unwittingly marginalize them by assuming that they know more than they do about how college works. "The assumption that all students come with a general understanding of the collegiate world unintentionally places some students even farther out on the margins of the institution" (Jack, 2019, p. 75).

Cull and Norelli (2021) state that "as our students have become increasingly diverse, our policies and practices have not" and suggest adding a diversity statement to the course syllabus, so that students know immediately upon beginning a given course that the professor supports, accepts, and will make accommodations for their diverse backgrounds and life circumstances. Including a diversity statement in course syllabi gives students the necessary reassurance that our classrooms and offices are safe spaces for them, even before we have the opportunity to actively demonstrate this during the academic term. An example of a diversity statement from University of Iowa College of Education (2020) is

> Respect for Diversity: It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups. In addition, if any of our class meetings conflict with your religious events, please let me know so that we can make arrangements for you.

It is also important to list the resources that the college makes available to students in the syllabus. In addition to the commonly-included services such as library and accessibility services, it is important to include resources such as counseling services, subsidized meal services, technology borrowing services, and childcare services directly in the course syllabus. The students who are most in need of these services often are not aware of them. Professors share in the responsibility of guiding students to understand and take advantage of the college's resources and meet the college's expectations, and part of this responsibility includes explaining to them what these resources and expectations are. In this way, we also ensure that students' experiences at our colleges are effectively preparing them for success at the four-year universities where they will transfer.

Validating students' backgrounds and identities in the classroom helps create a sense of community and belonging throughout the campus. If we can create an environment that makes students feel comfortable being themselves, they will become more open and more supportive of each other, taking our cue that it is the classroom and campus culture to empower others in who they are and what they bring. We must make all students feel as though they belong, because

if we are upholding the mission statements of our community colleges, everyone truly does belong; there is truly space for everyone. Again, classrooms and campuses should be spaces "that affirm [students'] competence, sense of self-worth and feelings of safety," where "students should feel valued and welcome regardless of their background or identity" (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). The classroom community and the larger college community should not in any way feel to students like an elitist experience that causes them to have the slightest sense of inadequacy for anything that they do or do not bring with them. Creating this sense of comfort, acceptance, and belonging for students in turn yields the benefit of increasing the likelihood of student retention and fortifying our programs.

Applying the above-mentioned practices, and any other equitable and inclusive student-centered teaching models that prioritize the emotional and psychological well-being of our students, should always prove to be a worthwhile endeavor. While schools may sometimes impose mandates that do not necessarily align with our compassionate teaching styles, we can consciously choose our students' well-being, self-image, and self-worth enough to find flexibility within the policies. Such actions within our classrooms as the above-mentioned examples—treating all students equally and compassionately, grading and giving feedback in a way that heightens their confidence, providing supplementary materials that create more inclusion, and validating students' identities and what they bring, in an effort to practice holistic, constructivist, and culturally responsive pedagogy—should all be obvious choices on the part of any truly student-centered educator.

We may not be able to do anything about students' physical well-being—about whether they go home to adequate housing, nutritious meals, or safe living spaces—but their social-emotional well-being for the three hours per week that they are in our college classrooms is well within our reach. As new studies on community college demographics similar to the ones previously cited continue to emerge, and as professors and administrators are made more aware of what students' circumstances and needs are, it will become increasingly possible to prioritize the social-emotional well-being of community college students. This type of shift toward a greater awareness of students' emotional and psychological needs in our policies and pedagogy will make education a more positive and accessible experience for students beginning college, rather than an intimidating or punitive experience, resulting in a higher probability of students choosing to continue in higher education.

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