

# Pedagogical Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Excellence in Public Health Education

Public Health Reports

1–6

© 2024, Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health  
All rights reserved.Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/00333549241269488  
journals.sagepub.com/home/phr

Cerise L. Hunt, PhD, MSW<sup>1</sup> , and Linda A. Alexander, EdD<sup>2</sup>

## Keywords

public health education, inclusive teaching, excellence, academic equity

The concept of inclusive excellence in graduate education is based on the idea that the subjects taught, the course content, and the teaching method all meaningfully affect students' learning and development.<sup>1</sup> Educators' efforts to advance equity begin in the classroom, where students have the opportunity to develop the skills and perspectives they need to address issues such as health inequities and racism. With the appropriate infrastructure, course materials, and use of inclusive teaching methodologies, the classroom provides a unique space for the evolution of thought, diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and insights from the field.

Instructors make important links between theory and practice through their choices and priorities in the classroom. Building a foundation of learning with an inclusive pedagogical lens creates an expectation that students will live in the learning milieu with tools for success cultivated as part of the learning trajectory. Therefore, implementing inclusive pedagogy does not merely represent a theoretical ideal; it represents a crucial step in creating a more just and equitable society, starting with educating future public health practitioners. Because our educational practices have ramifications, now is the time to act.

Promoting inclusive excellence in public health education involves recognizing and addressing the diverse academic needs of students. Educators are responsible for fostering an inclusive class environment where students are welcomed and encouraged to engage. Inclusion means that all students can authentically engage in the learning experience. Teaching approaches must be understood and adapted to students' varying perspectives and lived experiences.<sup>2-4</sup> It is therefore important to understand how an educator's teaching approach and own lived experience can unintentionally inhibit equity, inclusivity, and belonging in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> An inclusive pedagogical approach offers specific strategies to shift teaching practice to embrace the whole student in the learning process.<sup>3</sup> As a student-centered approach to teaching, inclusive pedagogy cultivates a learning environment that intentionally engages the wide range of social identities, learning preferences, and abilities

students bring to the classroom.<sup>2,3,6</sup> The goal is to create a classroom where students feel their voice matters, they are contributing to learning, and that they belong.

This article offers a resource for educators who seek to assess and enhance their teaching approaches to meet students' diverse needs. It outlines inclusive pedagogy, describes inclusive teaching strategies with practical techniques, and discusses implications for teaching public health. Inclusive pedagogy, when practiced, supports inclusive excellence in teaching.

## Positionality Statement

The first author is a Black woman scholar with more than 14 years of experience teaching health equity and community engagement courses in schools of public health. She is the Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and the Director of the Center for Public Health Practice. In her administrative role, she actively supports faculty and students in creating inclusive classroom environments, promoting equity, and advancing diversity in academic settings. Her blend of scholarly expertise and administrative leadership highlights her commitment to transformative change in public health education and practice.

The second author, an African American scholar, has more than 30 years of experience in professorial and academic leadership roles focused on teaching and public health curriculum development. She has been responsible for overseeing teaching and curricular competency assessment with

<sup>1</sup> Colorado School of Public Health, University of Colorado, Aurora, CO, USA

<sup>2</sup> Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health, Washington, DC, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Cerise L. Hunt, PhD, MSW, University of Colorado, Colorado School of Public Health, 13001 E 17th Pl, Campus Box B119-500, Aurora, CO 80045, USA.

Email: cerise.hunt@cuanschutz.edu

an emphasis on applied practice and health equity. Currently, she serves as the Chief Academic Officer at the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health, overseeing academic program goals and emphasizing the scholarship of teaching and learning. Her extensive experience underscores her dedication to advancing public health education and pedagogy nationally.

## Inclusive Pedagogy Approach

Inclusive pedagogy, as emphasized by Tuit<sup>3</sup> and Danowitz and Tuit,<sup>6</sup> involves a deliberate examination of both *what* is taught (content) and *how* (pedagogy). This approach underscores faculty–student interactions, fostering reciprocal relationships both within and outside the classroom that promote mutual respect, belonging, and affirmation.<sup>3</sup> The goal is to create learning communities that represent brave spaces for exploring and deconstructing meaning—spaces committed to critically evaluating so-called authoritative knowledge to inform students’ own understandings.<sup>7,8</sup> Such learning communities are characterized by a shared responsibility for learning and shared power.<sup>3,9,10</sup>

Establishing teaching practices that embrace the whole student, inclusive pedagogy allows students to express their identity and connect course content to lived experiences.<sup>3</sup> It enhances opportunities for student interaction, fosters belonging in the classroom,<sup>11</sup> and encourages teachers to embrace humility and to be content with not possessing all the answers. As Freire<sup>9</sup> stated, “Teachers learn and grow together with their students” (p. 53). Overall, inclusive pedagogy offers strategies that, if applied, can support student engagement in the learning experience.

The approach recommended in this commentary synthesizes research, personal experiences, and theoretical frameworks related to inclusive pedagogy into teaching strategies. This approach draws from the work of Danowitz and Tuit,<sup>6</sup> Salazar et al.,<sup>2</sup> Nilson,<sup>12</sup> and others,<sup>13–16</sup> and acknowledges the need to adapt traditional instructional methods to cater to an increasingly diverse student population. This recognition formed the basis for the development of the following inclusive teaching strategies.

## The Art of Intentional Design: Implementing Inclusive Pedagogical Strategies

Inclusive teaching is the deliberate act of integrating inclusive pedagogical practices into the learning process.<sup>17</sup> This approach recognizes the diverse identities learners bring to the educational experience and how they enhance the teaching and learning environment. Inclusive teaching ensures that educators establish an environment that challenges every student with high academic expectations and opportunities to contribute to learning and knowledge development.<sup>3,18</sup>

Creating an inclusive learning environment requires a vision and plan, which includes implementing specific strategies that integrate expectations for practicing equity and inclusion. This idea means that, at the outset, instructors must make an intentional decision about their course design.<sup>4</sup> The goal is to create an environment that supports students to become critical thinkers and ensures that course content promotes meaningful approaches to learning. Ramsden<sup>19</sup> defined learning as “changing the ways in which learners understand or experience or conceptualize the world around them” (p. 25). The purpose of teaching is to make learning possible and shape students’ understanding.<sup>14</sup> Integrating inclusive teaching strategies and concepts will support development of a classroom that affirms students, eases discomfort, and creates a brave space to engage in discourse surrounding current realities about health inequities and social justice. Six specific strategies for promoting inclusive teaching practices follow.

### Strategy 1: Self-Awareness

It is essential for faculty members to engage critically in the self-work of discovering their true selves through introspection, self-reflexivity, self-reflection, and action to authentically participate in the learning environment.<sup>13</sup> Palmer<sup>20</sup> reminds us, “We teach who we are” (p. 1). Educators must take the time to assess, perhaps deconstruct, and define who they are as an educator and how it aligns with their teaching method to determine their identity as an educator. Introspective interrogation of self is an ongoing process because our identities change over time. These efforts will help faculty become conscious, transparent, self-actualized, and humanistic in their teaching.<sup>2</sup> These efforts also will require educators to participate in training and continually assess their conscious and unconscious biases about people whose backgrounds and experiences differ from their own.<sup>2</sup> Educators should practice self-reflection about how they teach and interact with students. It may be useful to keep a journal of teaching experiences not only to reflect upon successes and challenges but also to identify areas for improvement.

Through critical self-awareness work, educators can design, support, and improve their pedagogy to be culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable.<sup>21</sup> Being self-aware is a continuous process that requires constant attention. By implementing the strategies described, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of themselves as educators, improve their teaching effectiveness, and cultivate an inclusive learning environment.

### Strategy 2: Examining Curriculum Design

Faculty should plan the content of every course with diverse students in mind. Recognizing and responding to each student’s unique needs is of utmost importance. Course syllabi should examine various viewpoints. It is important to

**Box 1.** Diversity and inclusion in the curriculum: considerations for educators, adapted from Salazar et al<sup>2</sup>

- 
- How has diversity been integrated into your course?
  - Have you considered content, readings, lectures, discussion topics, perspectives, examples, case studies, problems, and stories? Is the content balanced in its portrayal of diverse groups?
  - Are there multiple ways to access course materials and engage in learning that account for the range of learning styles?
  - Have you reflected critically on whom the curriculum includes or excludes?
  - Have you created opportunities to get to know your students on a personal and individual basis?
  - Is your course designed in a manner that facilitates the development of an inclusive learning community?
  - Will you establish norms and solicit feedback related to how students are experiencing the learning environment?
  - Does the style of teaching promote active learning, critical thinking, and collaboration among students?
  - Can students engage in hands-on learning experiences and apply knowledge to real-life contexts?
- 

continually review and renew curriculum to include equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice topics that promote dialogue, mutual respect, and cultural humility. Designing opportunities for students to interact respectfully and meaningfully will be essential.<sup>2,3</sup> To guide the examination process, Salazar et al<sup>2</sup> offered specific considerations for an inclusive teaching curriculum (Box 1).

**Strategy 3: Sharing Power and Responsibility**

Inclusive learning environments are characterized by both a sharing of power and responsibility.<sup>3,9,10</sup> The goal of democratizing classrooms is to ensure that students and teachers share power, authority, and decision-making. Tuit<sup>3</sup> affirms power is shared when, at any given moment, the student becomes the teacher, and the teacher becomes the student, as both share the responsibility for generating and sharing new knowledge and understanding. The faculty member is no longer solely responsible for producing or depositing information.<sup>9</sup> The intent is to form a learning community where knowledge is co-created through a process of self-discovery and social construction. Learning essentially is created by everyone.

For shared power to occur and to foster inclusiveness, the instructor should dedicate time on the first day to create class agreements or norms with their students. The class agreements will provide explicit expectations regarding behavior, interaction, and participation, and a collective responsibility for promoting equity, inclusion, and belonging.<sup>2</sup> As a result, students may feel affirmed and empowered as they learn, enabling them to stay engaged and persevere despite doubt and discomfort with course content. However, class agreements alone are not sufficient; classroom practices reenact and reinforce these values.<sup>14</sup> Educators act more as facilitators than as authority figures. Based on the premise that classroom norms are clearly delineated and upheld, students will have the courage to participate, take risks, and trust the learning process.

After establishing classroom expectations, the educator and students should engage in meaningful and reciprocal discussions to promote active engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration. Another promising practice is to create a

process of dialog that integrates students' lived experiences as much as the educators' experiences and knowledge.<sup>3,9</sup> Creating environments in which individuals bring their unique backgrounds and insights to the classroom is an essential inclusive pedagogical tool. This type of experience will require a shift from typical lectures to creating a more interactive class environment, such as small group discussions, student-led lectures, and applied practice experiences. During class, instructors should actively invite and encourage students' participation, supporting them in activating their voices. We suggest 6 strategies for sharing power (Box 2).

It is essential that educators not only maintain class norms but also model how to conduct oneself. If teachers do not model vulnerability and stepping outside of comfort zones by sharing their narratives and reflections, they cannot expect students to be open and share their experiences. Keep in mind Brookfield's<sup>15</sup> mantra for teachers, "I must model risk-taking before I ask anyone else to do so." When educators share their personal reflections to demonstrate their own challenges, struggles, and growth, they help students understand the benefits of being vulnerable and taking risks. This sharing will help create a brave and supportive environment where students are comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.

**Strategy 4: Activating Student Voice**

A central component of inclusive pedagogical models is the use of life experiences as part of the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Educators challenge students to personalize subject matter through their individual experiences and to make direct connections between knowledge development in the classroom and lessons learned through life experience. Educators who encourage students to personalize course content with their lived experience support the activation of student voice.<sup>3</sup>

The overall purpose of activating student voice is to make the actual classroom open and affirming for all students so they can authentically connect learning with lived experiences, thus broadening course content. Tuit<sup>3</sup> stresses that the activation of student voice contrasts with the silencing that often occurs for historically excluded groups who receive

**Box 2.** Sharing power in the classroom: strategies for educators

- Collaborate with students to create classroom agreements and expectations.
- Organize the course in a manner that encourages or invites learners to select topics and assignments based on their interests, values, needs, and strengths.
- Create a collaborative learning environment where students work together to solve problems, analyze complex issues, complete projects, or discuss ideas.
- Assist in promoting shared decision-making and accountability within groups by encouraging active participation and equitable distribution of responsibilities.
- Encourage students to take turns leading discussions, leading group activities, or sharing their expertise on specific topics.
- Provide regular opportunities for feedback and reflection on the teaching and learning process. Involve students in providing feedback on what is working well and what can be improved and collaborate with them to adjust as necessary.

explicit and implicit messages about the unacceptability of expressing alternative viewpoints or perspectives. Instead, educators must create learning environments where students feel comfortable engaging and speaking up, where all voices are encouraged and welcomed.

To achieve such a learning environment, educators should incorporate personalization of course content through methods such as personal narratives.<sup>3,4</sup> Narratives provide a mechanism for students to personalize subject matter and connect learning—that is, align course content—with their lived experiences.<sup>3,4</sup> For example, in a research methods course, students can write a reflective essay exploring how their background, values, and experiences shape their research approach. In this assignment, students analyze how personal experiences may affect their research questions, methodologies, and data interpretation. In addition, they can complete a brief assignment on health equity policy to support students using their voices for action. They can prepare a formal policy brief on a public health equity challenge that clearly describes the problem, analyzes the policy landscape and potential solutions, and recommends action. These strategies help broaden the course content and exemplify how theory informs practice. We describe several strategies for activating student voices (eTable 1 in Supplemental Material).

**Strategy 5: When Tensions Arise—Managing Conflict in the Classroom**

Encouraging students to share viewpoints and have critical discussions in class may lead to tension, but this tension can foster learning. Educators should anticipate conflict and prepare ahead for its resolution.<sup>22,23</sup> The goal is to create an environment in which strong emotions can be expressed, students are not harmed or shut down, everyone is able to participate, agreement or consensus is not the focus of discourse, and discussion focuses on understanding diverse perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

Students should sometimes expect to be uncomfortable during course discussions or activities. However, learning to embrace discomfort and stay present is crucial for personal growth. Taking risks and stepping out of comfort zones helps students acquire new skills. Above all, when tensions arise in

the classroom, it is the teacher's responsibility to acknowledge and mitigate issues to maintain an inclusive learning environment. Salazar et al<sup>2</sup> provide strategies for managing tense classroom situations (eTable 2 in Supplemental Material). To reiterate, educators should prepare ahead of time to resolve potential conflict.

**Strategy 6: Moving Past Assumptions—Being a Critically Reflective Teacher**

Educators sometimes make assumptions about how students learn; these assumptions can be justified or may need reframing. Assuming that all students are grasping the course content is irresponsible.<sup>15</sup> An essential pedagogical practice involves assessing student learning and engaging in critical self-reflection to scrutinize teaching practices, beliefs, and assumptions. This approach goes beyond surface-level evaluation, prompting educators to critically analyze their effect on learning and interactions with students.<sup>15</sup>

Critical reflection is key to uncovering and challenging power dynamics, allowing educators to better understand how students experience learning.<sup>15</sup> The primary focus is on identifying and testing assumptions that guide teaching actions (eg, lectures, discussions, activities), ensuring alignment with values of equity, inclusive excellence, and belonging. As a result, the instructor will be able to make informed decisions about their actions to cultivate student learning. To facilitate this, educators must be self-aware, open-minded, and willing to challenge and adapt existing practices.

Throughout the semester, assessing students' experiences is crucial for measuring learning through methods such as class discussions, reflection papers, and anonymous surveys.<sup>15,19</sup> Anonymous feedback mechanisms, such as online surveys and suggestion boxes, encourage honest opinions without fear of repercussions. To a considerable degree, teaching requires flexibility. After assessment, it may be necessary to modify courses and teaching methods to better address the students' needs. We outline specific strategies for being a critically reflective teacher (eTable 3 in Supplemental Material).

## Public Health Implications

Educators must be mindful of the influence of their teaching approach on students' educational outcomes. Similarly, educators should purposefully assess and adapt their teaching practices to cater to the diverse needs of students.<sup>2-4</sup> The inclusive teaching strategies described provide a framework for fostering an environment where students feel their voice matters and they are contributing to learning.

In response to the imperative for inclusive excellence in public health education, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health released a 2021 framework, *Dismantling Racism and Structural Racism in Academic Public Health*, including a domain focused on education, pedagogy, and training.<sup>24,25</sup> The Council on Education for Public Health asserts the importance of preparing the public health workforce to address real-world challenges.<sup>26</sup> It is critical that educators assess their teaching strategies and consider inclusive practices. Promising practices such as contract grading, in which educators establish clear expectations and criteria for assignments, allow students to negotiate a contract that details their educational responsibilities and assessment methods.<sup>27</sup> Another practice involves zero grading, in which educators focus on detailed feedback aimed at improvement, prioritizing learning outcomes over numerical scores.<sup>28</sup> The aim is to promote a growth mindset and reduce performance-related stress. In addition, partnering with community organizations to offer hands-on experiences in community-engaged practice can enhance cultural understanding and proficiency. The intentional practice of inclusive pedagogy supports excellence in teaching and advances equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the classroom and beyond.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Cerise L. Hunt, PhD, MSW  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9031-7655>

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online. The authors have provided these supplemental materials to give readers additional information about their work. These materials have not been edited or formatted by *Public Health Reports'* scientific editors and, thus, may not conform to the guidelines of the *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th Edition.

## References

1. Tuitt FA. Standing on the outside looking in: implications for practice. In: Howard-Hamilton MF, Moreson-Quano CL, Johnson SD, Windle-Wagner R, Santigue L, eds. *Standing on the Outside Looking In: Underrepresented Students' Experiences in Advanced Degree Programs*. Stylus; 2009: 224-256.
2. Salazar MDC, Norton AS, Tuitt FA. 12: weaving promising practices for inclusive excellence into the higher education classroom. *To Improv Acad*. 2010;28(1):208-226. doi:10.1002/j.2334-4822.2010.tb00604.x
3. Tuitt FA. Afterword: realizing a more inclusive pedagogy. In: Howell A, Tuitt FA, eds. *Race and Higher Education: Rethinking Pedagogy in Diverse College Classrooms*. Harvard Education Publishing Group; 2003:243-268.
4. Tuitt F, Hayes C, Stewart S. Transforming the classroom at traditionally White institutions to make Black lives matter. *To Improv Acad*. 2018;37(1):63-76. doi:10.1002/tia2.20071
5. Davis T, Harrison LM. *Advancing Social Justice: Tools, Pedagogies, and Strategies to Transform Your Campus*. Jossey-Bass; 2018.
6. Danowitz MA, Tuitt F. Enacting inclusivity through engaged pedagogy: a higher education perspective. *Equity Excell Educ*. 2011;44(1):40-56. doi:10.1080/10665684.2011.539474
7. Arao B, Clemens K. From safe spaces to brave spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In: Landreman L, ed. *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections From Social Justice Educators*. Stylus; 2013:135-150.
8. Newmann FM. *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*. Teachers College Press; 1992.
9. Freire P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Ramos MB, trans. Continuum International Publishing Group; 1970.
10. hooks b. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge; 1994.
11. Zimmerman MH. *Perspectives on the Interpersonal Relationships of Learners in College Learning Communities*. Seattle University Press; 1991.
12. Nilson LB. *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. 4th ed. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Jossey-Bass; 2016.
13. Stewart S. Advancing a critical and inclusive praxis: pedagogical and curriculum innovations in the Caribbean. In: Tuitt F, Haynes C, Stewart S, eds. *Race, Equity, and the Learning Environment: The Global Relevance of Critical and Inclusive Pedagogies in Higher Education*. Stylus; 2016:9-22.
14. Ginsberg WD, Nieto S. *Diversity and Motivation: Culturally Responsive Teaching in College*. John Wiley & Sons; 2009.
15. Brookfield SD. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. John Wiley & Sons; 2017.
16. Lyman F. The responsive classroom discussions: the inclusion of all students. In: Anderson A, ed. *Mainstreaming Digest*. University of Maryland Press; 1981:109-113.
17. Milem JF. The educational benefits of diversity: evidence from multiple sectors. In: Chang MJ, Witt D, Jones J, Hakuta K, eds. *Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Colleges and Universities*. Stanford University Press; 2003:126-169.

18. Williams DA, Berger JB, McClendon SA. *Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions*. Association of American Colleges and Universities; 2005.
19. Ramsden P. *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. 2nd ed. Routledge Falmer; 2003.
20. Palmer P. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. 10th anniversary ed. Jossey-Bass; 2007.
21. Goerke V, Taylor K, Kickett M. A step on the messy path to alignment: developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intercultural capability framework. *Inter Educ J Comp Perspect*. 2015;14(2):78-89.
22. Chesler M, Lewis AE, Crowfoot JE. *Challenging Racism in Higher Education: Promoting Justice*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 2005.
23. Osei-Kofi N, Richards SL, Smith DG. Inclusion, reflection, and the politics of knowledge: on working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments. In: Rendon LI, Garcia M, Person D, eds. *Transforming the First-Year Experience for Students of Color*. University of South Carolina; 2004:55-56.
24. Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health. Dismantling racism and structural racism in academic public health: a framework. 2021. Accessed August 16, 2023. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/ASPPH\\_Media\\_Files/Docs/ASPPH%20Task%20Force%20Statement\\_2021.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/ASPPH_Media_Files/Docs/ASPPH%20Task%20Force%20Statement_2021.pdf)
25. Sullivan LM, Weist EM, Barrington WE, et al. Education for public health 2030: transformation to meet health needs in a changing world. *Front Public Health*. 2023;11:1269272. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2023.1269272
26. Council on Education for Public Health. Accreditation criteria: schools of public health and public health programs. 2016. Accessed July 15, 2023. [https://media.ceph.org/wp\\_assets/2016.Criteria.pdf](https://media.ceph.org/wp_assets/2016.Criteria.pdf)
27. Litterio LM. Contract grading in a technical writing classroom: a case study. *J Writing Assess*. 2016;9:2.
28. Anderson LW. A critique of grading: policies, practices, and technical matters. *Educ Policy Anal Arch*. 2018;26(49). doi:10.14507/epaa.26.3814