



## “Treat me like a person, rather than another number”: university student perceptions of inclusive classroom practices

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### ABSTRACT

Using Feminist Participatory Action Research, graduate and undergraduate students at a midsized, midwestern public university collaborated with investigators on welcoming and inclusive practices in the classroom through focus-group discussions. The research team conducted six focus-group sessions with 39 students from marginalized communities about how instructors can include and center marginalized and intersecting identities based on age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and socioeconomic status in face-to-face and online classrooms. Discussions centered around instructor behavior and characteristics, what instructors did before and during class interactions, and the teaching materials they created that led to feelings of being welcomed and included. The relationship between students and instructors was paramount, and instructors who used more immediate and supportive communication behaviors were seen as more welcoming and inclusive. A welcoming and inclusive classroom means centering student experiences, identities, and concerns, being a reflexive and responsive instructor, and focusing on the interpersonal relationship between instructor and students. We discuss our findings and suggest best practices for inclusive pedagogy.

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While educators in higher education recognize the increasing diversity of students' experiences, we are still working to understand how to be inclusive of that diversity. While research has been conducted from the instructor perspective examining strategies used to create an inclusive classroom, what students from these marginalized communities view as important for creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment has received less attention. The current project aims to continue this conversation by taking a feminist approach to the study of how students perceive inclusive classroom practices. It began when a trans\*<sup>1</sup> student made an appointment with the first author to talk about welcoming classroom practices. They worked together to create a discussion panel of trans\* students for a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies brown bag about making trans\* students feel more welcome in the classroom. The discussion was fruitful, so the first author put together a research team consisting of faculty and graduate students

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who collaborated with university students from other marginalized communities to learn about how instructors can welcome, include, and center marginalized intersecting identities based on age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, veteran status, ability, and socioeconomic status in the classroom. We were interested in students' perceptions of inclusive and welcoming university classrooms, both face-to-face and online, and instructional practices that realize and center minoritized intersecting perspectives.

## **Inclusive pedagogy**

Classrooms today are different now than they were a few years ago. As Florian (2012) notes, "The increasing cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity of today's classrooms demands more inclusive approaches to schooling" (p. 275). In order to create classrooms where students feel comfortable and motivated to learn, educators should adopt pedagogies and techniques to be inclusive of "culturally diverse and underrepresented students" (Atay & Trebing, 2017, p. 3). Inclusive pedagogy, then, seeks to challenge the normative classroom "structures, practices, and curricula" that disempower marginalized student populations (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2019, p. 2) and enables instructors and students to cocreate a supportive classroom environment where every student has equal access to knowledge (Fassett & Golsan, 2017). Our understanding of inclusive pedagogy has expanded beyond diverse learning styles to include marginalized social identities such as race, class, nationality, ability, and gender (DeTurk, 2017; LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). The current project adds to these continuing efforts to bring inclusive pedagogy into the university classroom through teacher immediacy.

## **Teacher immediacy**

Instructors can make students feel welcome and included in the face-to-face and virtual classroom by using immediate behaviors—those verbal and nonverbal behaviors that demonstrate warmth and closeness and show a person is approachable and available for communication (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Witt et al. (2004) found that teacher immediacy can positively enhance learning by motivating students and keeping them engaged within the classroom. Additionally, teachers' use of immediacy, such as sense of humor, self-disclosure, and complimenting students, positively affected students' perceived and affective learning (Witt et al., 2004). Student learning is facilitated by both verbal and nonverbal immediacy (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968). Verbal immediacy behaviors include referring to students by their names, asking how students are doing, using correct pronouns, and giving students the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and opinions. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors can include making eye contact with students, smiling, and moving around the classroom. In online classroom environments, students still favor immediate interactions with instructors and their peers (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2019). In this context, immediacy can include elements of course design such as "adding color, using figurative language, emoticons, and fun fonts" (Dixson et al., 2017, p. 50). This approach to syllabi and messages can create a positive and welcoming space for students in online platforms like Canvas and Blackboard. Additionally, instructors can show their presence by engaging with students via discussion boards and/or other communication areas (Dixson et al., 2017). Interpersonal relationships form between

teachers and students when they start to perceive each other as individuals beyond their designated classroom roles (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Therefore, teachers can create stable and inclusive learning environments by establishing positive relationships with students through the use of immediate and supportive behaviors.

### Supportive communication

Because students from marginalized communities have to navigate a variety of issues beyond the classroom (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019), instructors can include, welcome, and empower students by offering social support. Albrecht and Adelman (1987) conceptualize social support as “the verbal and nonverbal communication between individuals that seeks to decrease uncertainty relative to situational circumstances, one’s self, the other person, or the relationship” (p. 19). Scholars have shown that “high-quality supportive interactions have a positive influence on psychological, physical, and relational outcomes both immediately and in the long term” (MacGeorge et al., 2012, p. 224).

Students need to have instructors who care about their performance in class as well as their well-being; all students benefit from teachers’ social support. While supportive messages have many characteristics that determine their quality, one in particular seems to stand out: high person-centeredness. High person-centered messages exhibit more caring and concern than low or moderate person-centered messages (Bodie et al., 2012; Burleson, 1994). High person-centered messages are supportive in that they help legitimize people’s experiences and emotions (Bodie et al., 2012), and they are “tailored to the psychological experiences of the hearer” (Goldsmith, 1994, p. 35). Research suggests that perceived and received support—the idea that support is available when needed—is associated with more positive feelings and less negative feelings and boosts support perceptions (Eagle et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). Teachers who behave in ways that communicate social support’s availability to their students can have a powerful impact on students’ learning and their psychological well-being.

### Feminist Participatory Action research

Given our interest in practical application, feminist ethics, social change, and collaborative research, we used Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), which values collaboration, power sharing, and different knowledges (Leavy & Harris, 2018). The research team conducted “ethical and empowering research *with* rather than *on*” marginalized communities (Singh et al., 2013, p. 94). This approach views power as a fluid, relational, and negotiated process between students and teachers that takes into account the cultural context and sociocultural influences as teachers and students negotiate power in the classroom (Dannels, 2015).

We were interested in hearing from students, in their own words, about what makes them feel welcome and included in our classrooms, so that we could implement this feedback at our institution. Thus, we framed the research using feminist standpoint theory paying specific attention to culture, the social forces, and intersecting identities that shape the lives of individuals (Manning & Denker, 2015). A feminist standpoint aims to identify the “common threads that connect the diverse experiences” of individuals and pinpoints specific causes that shape those experiences with a focus on students’

subjective experiences within the classroom (Bullis & Bach, 1996; Hartsock, 1983, p. 246). Inclusive classroom environments are created through systemic transformation. When students have the opportunity to articulate their experiences, they can reveal the oppressive and stigmatizing practices that make them feel excluded in the classroom; change can occur when students use their standpoints to identify what makes them feel included, and in turn, create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere (Allen, 2000).

Since FPAR seeks to enact social change through collaborative interactions between researchers and participants, participants helped identify exclusive classroom practices while also providing thoughts, feelings, and opinions relative to creating inclusive classroom environments. Scholars argue that “critical communication pedagogy is commitment to pedagogy as praxis, teachers and students working together to observe, understand, and solve pedagogical issues that influence and shape their learning environments and processes” (Atay & Trebing, 2017, p. 4; see also Fassett & Warren, 2007). As we seek to create inclusive classroom environments, we align with Fassett and Warren (2007) in that “we must not take that action *on* others, *for* others, or *to* others; a pedagogy of the oppressed ... is work under-taken together, *with* one another” (p. 51). Students collaborated with investigators on welcoming and inclusive practices in the classroom through focus group discussions. Using focus groups enabled participants to discuss their subjective experiences, and to pinpoint commonalities among their experiences with other group members (Munday, 2013).

## Method

We were interested in how university students perceive inclusive and welcoming classrooms and instructional practices that realize and center minoritized intersecting perspectives and used an FPAR design because of the focus on collaboration and power sharing (Leavy & Harris, 2018). Students at a midsized midwestern public university collaborated with the research team, composed of 11 graduate students in an interpersonal communication seminar and the first and second author, on welcoming and inclusive practices in the classroom through focus group discussions. The research team discussed with students how we could use their suggestions to create training materials for instructors on campus.

## Procedures

Participants were recruited through campus listservs and emails to relevant campus student group leaders. We conducted six focus groups with 39 participants with four to 11 students in each group. The first and second author and one to two graduate student team members facilitated the discussions. The focus groups began with the project’s description and informed consent. Then, participants filled out questionnaires about demographic, descriptive, and identity categories. After the questionnaires were completed, the focus group moderator (the first author) began the conversation with an ice breaker and asked questions that engaged participants and created dialogue (e.g., What makes you feel welcome in the classroom? What practices can instructors engage in that would help you feel included in the classroom? What should instructors do on the first day of class? What should instructors consider during class interactions?). The discussions ranged in length from 1 to 2.5 hours. Participants received a \$15 Starbucks

gift card for participating. After the focus groups, graduate student team members transcribed the focus group they participated in.

### Participants

We present our focus-group participants' relevant characteristics in [Table 1](#) to show their multiple positionings. The major demographic, descriptive, and identity characteristics noted in the table include age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, veteran status, and income. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 47 years old with an average age of 27 years old. Four (10%) participants were first-year undergraduate students, six (15%) were sophomores, seven (18%) were juniors, 12 (31%) were seniors, and 10

**Table 1.** Focus-Group Participant Characteristics.

Age	Ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Veteran	Income
<i>Group A</i>					
19	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
19	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
21	Black/African American	Prefer not to disclose	Woman	No	>20,000
23	B/AA/white	Bisexual	Woman	No	20,000–34,999
20	White	Gay	Man	No	35,000–49,999
21	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
20	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
<i>Group B</i>					
23	White	Heterosexual	Man	No	>20,000
22	Mixed race	Bisexual	Woman	No	>20,000
19	White	Pansexual/queer	Nonconforming woman	No	>20,000
21	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Man	No	X
19	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	35,000–49,999
20	Hispanic/Latinx	Heterosexual	Man	Yes	75,000–99,999
<i>Group C</i>					
21	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
18	Hispanic/Latinx	Heterosexual	Woman	No	<100,000
26	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	20,000–34,999
18	B/AA/Native Am	Bisexual	Woman	No	X
26	White	Bisexual	Woman	No	>20,000
<i>Group D</i>					
19	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	20,000–34,999
19	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
18	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	50,000–74,999
24	White	Queer	Woman	No	>20,000
21	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
20	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
<i>Group E</i>					
30	Asian	Heterosexual	Man	No	75,000–99,999
27	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Man	Yes	X
24	White	Heterosexual	Man	Yes	35,000–49,999
25	Asian/white	Heterosexual	Man	No	20,000–34,999
26	Hispanic/Latinx	Lesbian	Woman	Yes	>20,000
37	Black/African American	Heterosexual	Woman	Yes	50,000–74,999
23	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	X
25	White	Questioning/unsure	Woman	No	50,000–74,999
25	Asian/white	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
28	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
47	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>100,000
<i>Group F</i>					
28	Asian	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
23	Asian	Queer	Man	No	20,000–34,999
43	White	Heterosexual	Woman	No	>20,000
18	White	Pan/queer/asexual	Queer/transman	No	X

(26%) were graduate students. Four participants (all graduate students) were international students. Sixteen (41%) participants reported being single, 11 (28%) dating, two (5%) cohabitating, one (2%) engaged, five (13%) married, three (8%) divorced, and one participant did not report their relationship status. Seven (18%) participants had children.

## Analysis

We used analytic coding to sort the focus-group participants' perceptions of welcoming and inclusive practices into thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authors met to discuss analysis and coding in three sessions. First, we used an open coding procedure in which we used welcoming practices and instructor characteristics and behavior as sensitizing constructs to guide our initial read-through (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We separately read through each transcript and our notes from the focus groups, reflexively noting themes that could be used for further analysis. At our second meeting, we used our initial coding to develop a code book with theme definitions and examples. We included the following categories:

- (1) Instructor Characteristics
- (2) Instructor Behavior
- (3) Instructor Behavior Before First Class, First Class, During Class
- (4) Teaching Materials
- (5) Inclusive Practices Outcomes

We used the codebook to guide our subsequent focus group transcript analysis, noting themes and examples. We also engaged in theoretical coding where we looked for connections between themes of instructor characteristics and behaviors and the implications for instructor behavior and teaching materials as outcomes of inclusive teaching practices. In the final coding meeting, we discussed our coding process, working out any disagreements through discussion.

## Findings

Findings from the focus groups shed light on practices that students find important for building an inclusive and welcoming classroom. These discussed practices centered around instructor behavior and characteristics, what instructors did before and during class interactions, and how instructors can help create a welcoming and inclusive classroom. We discuss the findings for the two major themes:

- (1) instructor behaviors before and during class interactions
- (2) transforming power differences

### Instructor behaviors before and during class interactions

Our discussions revealed the importance of the relationship between students and instructors; when instructors use immediate and supportive communication behaviors, students

perceive them as welcoming and inclusive. Instructor characteristics, behaviors, and classroom policies made students feel welcome in the classroom. Instructor characteristics referenced perceptions of instructors' dispositions as welcoming and immediate, and what an instructor does inside and outside class to help students feel connected and promote learning through interpersonal relationships.

### ***Before the semester begins***

Students have expectations regarding how instructors can enhance their learning experience before the semester starts. Students discussed being contacted by the instructor and the instructor using this time to learn about the students as important.

*Contact Students.* Inclusive pedagogy is a commitment that begins from the conceptualization of a class. When asked about what made them feel welcome in the classroom, several participants noted the importance of having contact with instructors before classes began. For many, this initial contact not only offered practical information such as class time and location but also opened the door for student-instructor connection. For example, one participant stated:

Some of my professors have sent out emails saying things like, "Hey, I'm excited to see you in class. Just [a] reminder, this is where it is, and this is the time [it] starts." So that's nice just knowing that "Oh, they know I'm a student," even before going into the course.

In addition to emails, another participant suggested that instructors activate their Canvas shell a few days before the class begins. Doing so allows instructors to post messages for students and gives students the opportunity to reach out with questions. Being contacted by the instructor before the semester is underway made the students feel engaged in the class and imparted the idea that the instructor wanted to know them in order to work with them throughout the semester.

*Learn about Students.* Before the semester begins, instructors can promote inclusivity by learning about their students' identities, circumstances, and concerns. Participants stated that instructors can look at their class roster and identify any special populations, such as commuter or transfer students. One student said, "Professors ... should research students ... kind of look at the roster and realize like where we're coming from because being a transfer student, [I] was ... in a classroom with a bunch of freshmen ... so I felt really alienated." In this scenario, the student felt left out when their instructor asked the classroom get-to-know-you questions that emphasized students' first year status without acknowledging this participant's status as a transfer student. Participants suggested that instructors gain information about their students before starting the semester through either an electronic get-to-know-you survey or a phone call. For instance, a participant emphasized the importance of learning about students in online classes:

One of my instructors from my online class—we actually had to set up a 5-minute telephone call with him at the beginning of the semester [to] ... explain if there's any extenuating circumstances—like [being] a single parent, or a mom or anything like that.

Learning about students before the start of the semester can help instructors build inclusive environments by conveying to students that they are important to the learning relationship.



## ***First day of class***

Students explained that instructors can use the first day of class to build an inclusive and welcoming environment. To set the tone for the semester, instructors can encourage introductions, set a group atmosphere for the class, review the syllabus and course expectations, and appropriately self-disclose by sharing information about themselves.

*Set the Tone.* Given that the first day of class sets the tone for the rest of the semester, it is good for instructors to set an inclusive tone from day one. Creating an inclusive classroom requires a holistic approach; each student needs to feel like an instructor sees them as a unique individual while the classroom environment's tone conveys respect and care for all students. Instructors should set expectations for class discussions, respect students' backgrounds, and make everyone feel safe to express their ideas and to learn from one another. One participant said that to be inclusive instructors should "lay that groundwork that we're here to talk ... in a safe environment." When setting the tone, instructors should also ask students for their pronouns and names, as well as use and pronounce those correctly. Instructors validate students' identities when they see and treat students as capable learners, respect them, and make them feel welcome so that they are comfortable asking for help.

Another participant reflected on a class where the instructor established that groundwork on the first day: "At the beginning of class, we went over consensus rules and certain ways we were all going to navigate the classroom. And that was really helpful. Especially because all students come from different backgrounds." Other participants expressed similar sentiments, for instance:

It's important that teachers understand the difference between respecting other people's opinions and shutting down hate because I feel like a lot of times ... teachers want to be that impartial body, but if people are doing things like not respecting somebody else's pronouns or saying something that is really racist, they should not be allowed to persist.

On the first day of class, participants want instructors to communicate that they will not tolerate any discriminatory attitudes or behaviors in the classroom. Thus, teacher immediacy also involves respecting students and their identities by refuting oppressive and hurtful comments from other students. Classrooms should be a safe space for students to share their ideas and collaborate with other students. In addition to being inclusive themselves, instructors should help everyone else in the classroom be inclusive as well. Many students have only experienced traditional classroom environments that did not prioritize inclusive practices. On the first day of class, instructors can start to cocreate a classroom with students and teach about inclusivity from the ground up. Additionally, even if instructors do not notice any exclusive practices themselves within the class, students should feel comfortable approaching their instructors with their concerns outside of class.

*Encourage Introductions and Set a Group Atmosphere.* Several participants noted the importance of creating a group atmosphere that cultivates student collaboration and support throughout the semester. Creating a group atmosphere is essential for inclusive pedagogy as it will help students create relationships with other students in the classroom and encourage collaboration and support. For example, one participant noted, "feeling connected with just the people around you can really help you even outside of the classroom." Another participant mentioned that their instructor facilitated



collaboration and support in class by having students introduce themselves and exchange contact information with the people they sat next to. That way, if a student had to miss class, they could reach out to the people around them. Using introductions and cultivating relationships between students is also important in an online class. As one student said,

professors will have a discussion board where you insert your intro and stuff ... I know everyone dreads it but it's kind of cool to read [and] go "oh, I could connect with that person maybe because they have similar interests as me."

Focus-group participants valued relationships and feeling connected to each other and the instructor in face-to-face and online classes.

*Go Over Syllabus and Expectations.* For participants, covering the syllabus in detail was a useful way to make students feel welcome in the classroom on the first day. Not only did covering the syllabus help establish the instructor's expectations, but also it served as a resource for students throughout the semester. Participants indicated that they want their instructor to provide an overview of the entire semester on day one. A participant stated, "I understand that some things might change—that's completely fair, things happen. I get it. But for the most part [saying] 'this is how the semester is going to go' is really helpful." Additionally, several participants commented on the significance of syllabi that include campus resources. However, they also noted that it is not enough to just include the campus resources in the syllabus; instructors should explain the campus resources in detail. One participant said:

Most professors just copy and paste the same accessibility statement into their syllabi. They should make sure students ... both understand accessibility practices and available options. They should open the door for that conversation before it's needed. Professors should discuss accessibility and Title IX options on the first class, and they should define what accessibility and disability are. It's not just physical disabilities that count. [People with] mental disabilities and invisible disabilities have options too.

As this participant noted, discussing campus resources on day one can help "open the door" for important conversations that could help students succeed in the classroom. Additionally, conversation about campus resources shows that instructors recognize college student struggles, and that they want to help.

*Self-disclosure.* Many participants mentioned the importance of instructor self-disclosure on the first day of class. Participants felt that the classroom is more inclusive when instructors share aspects from their own life, and it could make students feel less vulnerable. One participant noted, "I like when professors give us a really deep background of themselves ... I like when you just get to know them more, so you know who's going to be teaching you for 14 weeks." Participants saw self-disclosure as a way to get to know the instructor, which in turn made the participants more comfortable with that instructor. For example, one participant emphasized self-disclosure's importance by asking, "Why would I open up to you when you don't open up to me?" Finally, students viewed an instructor's self-disclosure as a sign of mutual respect. One participant stated, "Reciprocate what you ask students." By doing what they ask students to do, instructors demonstrate respect for their students and establish an expectation that students and the instructor are working together to build a learning community.

## During the semester

Focus-group participants said that instructors could maintain an inclusive classroom environment throughout the semester by being approachable, staying engaged, providing resources, providing trigger warnings when appropriate, and using inclusive teaching materials.

*Being approachable.* Focus-group participants wanted instructors to be approachable throughout the semester. Student identities are validated when instructors see and treat students as capable learners, respect them, and make them feel welcome so that they are comfortable asking for help. For example, if an instructor is easy to talk with, personable, approachable, open, encouraging, recognized the whole student, and do not reinforce rigid power hierarchies, they would be seen as welcoming and approachable. Participants wanted an opportunity to provide feedback to an instructor other than the end-of-semester evaluation. Students recognized that instructors are not infallible and wanted instructors to be open to feedback. For instance, one student said that “I have an instructor now [who] ... is open to criticism ... and open to change his teaching style to help us learn better.” Other participants expressed that an inclusive instructor prioritizes students’ learning needs and will occasionally check in with the students. Students felt that instructors were approachable when they could discuss issues with them. One participant mentioned that productive two-way communication makes an inclusive classroom. If students are having issues with class requirements, assignments, or something in their personal life, they want to feel that they can talk to their instructor: “It’s really helpful that the professor tries to understand where we’re coming from. Students aren’t superheroes.”

Boundaries between instructors and students are necessary, but that does not preclude an interpersonal relationship where instructors are an essential part of a student’s support network. Other participants said that they prefer when instructors verbally convey that they will help and support their students: “In the beginning just be like ‘if you’re generally having a really hard time with an assignment ... come up to me and we’ll figure something out.’”

Being approachable also included knowing students and taking time to understand them and their concerns. Participants said that they feel included when instructors know their names, use correct pronouns, and take the time to check in with students. For example, “She learned every single person’s name ... she would call you by your name, so that made it feel really inclusive. Then she would talk to people before and after class about what they’re doing on the weekend ... stuff like that.”

Finally, instructor approachability is essential for students with invisible, marginalized identities to give students a space to discuss how their identity influences their participation and engagement inside and outside the classroom. This sentiment appeared several times throughout the focus groups, especially regarding invisible disabilities. For example, one participant noted, “I want to feel comfortable emailing a professor about disability concerns ... I like when they are upfront and give you accommodation options.”

Knowing students’ names and using them, asking about students’ lives, being open to feedback, and demonstrating that you care about students both within and outside of the classroom contributes to instructors being approachable. These behaviors encourage students to reach out when they need help. This approachability also extends to online classroom environments.

*Staying engaged.* Another aspect of teacher immediacy involves paying attention to the verbal and nonverbal responses of students: “A lot of times students will not necessarily speak up in class or come to your office hours and tell you that they are uncomfortable in class.” Many participants stated that instructors can be inclusive throughout the semester by maintaining a strong presence in their lives. For many of our participants, utilizing office hours was an important way to maintain their relationship, because it showed students that the instructor was available and cared. One participant said when instructors do not attend their scheduled office hours, it makes them “shut down” because they do not feel respected by that instructor. This presence can be hard to achieve for instructors teaching online courses; however, it is not impossible. One participant found it extremely beneficial when their online instructor required them to set up a five-minute phone call as a way to hold office hours. Participants also suggested that instructors use other forms of online chatting, such as Skype, as a way for instructors to maintain an open line of communication.

*Providing resources.* Another way that instructors can be inclusive throughout the semester is by giving students information about campus and community resources. Participants felt cared for when instructors not only covered campus resources on day one with a review of the syllabus, but also continued to remind students of these resources throughout the semester. For example, one participant said that because of her relationship with her instructor, she was able to get the referral to campus services that she needed. She stated,

Like I don't think I would have personally reached out on my own had someone not just like given it to me. Like, “Just go. Here's the drop-in walk-in hours.” Because I *did* have a relationship with that person, I felt comfortable saying like, “I am struggling ...”

Participants also mentioned the importance of instructors directing them to academic resources. One participant stated that “providing external resources just helps whether it's their own material or just giving you information about the Learning Commons or other material like tutoring or clubs.” Access to such resources illustrates the instructor's prioritizing student success and inclusivity.

*Providing trigger warnings.* Participants discussed the importance of trigger warnings. Trigger warnings are statements given before an assignment, video, or activity that are used to inform the participants that the material may be potentially distressing. For example, an instructor may provide a trigger warning before showing a video that depicts violent crimes so that students who may be triggered by this material can have advanced warning. One participant explained that they need to be aware of sensitive topics that might be discussed in class. For instance, “if we were to talk about something like that [sexual violence], if something recently happened or if I've been working through something with my therapist—I wouldn't be able to mentally handle that.” Using trigger warnings is an inclusive practice because they indicate that the instructor has thoughtfully taken different reactions and responses to the material into consideration before assigning it. One participant noted that these trigger warnings can be especially useful in classes, such as ethnic studies, and when dealing with units about sensitive and difficult content (e.g., sexual violence).

*Use of inclusive teaching materials.* In addition to instructor characteristics and behaviors, participants mentioned teaching materials—the syllabus and the university learning management system (LMS)—as vital in making a class accessible and for them to feel that

they are invited to participate in class. Participants gave several suggestions for how instructors can be more inclusive on their syllabi, including the importance of stating the instructor's code of ethics. This code of ethics includes defining what constitutes discrimination, describing what it means for a classroom to be a safe space, and discussing how the students can contribute to that safe space. One participant mentioned that such a code of ethics in the syllabus opens the door to what might normally be a challenging conversation.

Several students in one focus group discussed the importance of having alternative assignments in the syllabus, especially for students with disabilities or for students that might be triggered by certain topics. For instance, a participant explained that instructors should "have something also available for [students] instead of them having to struggle with what's already going on. They also have to worry about not being able to do this thing because it's going to trigger my mental health." Alternative assignments and/or flexibility in assignments may help accommodate students with disabilities. One participant stated that "a professor asked me not to take notes on my laptop, because you learn more from handwriting notes. I understand that may be true, but I have a physical disability that makes taking handwritten notes extremely painful for me." Instructors should accommodate students' needs even if it means being flexible with course policy. Alternative and flexible assignments provide a useful accommodation for students with extenuating life circumstances as well as students with disabilities. At the same time, building flexibility into assignments, and creating assignments reflexively, can potentially eliminate the need for alternatives in the first place.

Actively using a university's LMS can help students stay engaged and feel included. One example discussed was instructors posting PowerPoints online. For some, having access to PowerPoints online before class was useful because it allowed them to prepare more for class. One participant said they like to "sit with the content a little bit before I get to class." Other participants appreciated when the PowerPoints were online after class because this gave them an opportunity to check their notes to see if they missed anything. Another participant said that some students have different note taking paces, which can make keeping up with the PowerPoint in class difficult.

Participants felt it was important for instructors to use Canvas (an online LMS) not only to post PowerPoint slides, but also for other class resources, such as handouts, readings, and other notes. One thing to consider when using LMS is to keep all class resources open throughout the semester, as one military participant said, "Having all the modules opened and unlocked ... for us [military students] is helpful because we already know what we're going to be doing five months from now." Therefore, it is important for instructors to consider how to best use LMS, including for nontraditional students.

This section detailed student perceptions of how instructors can be inclusive throughout the semester. As one student suggested, "trying is all it takes." In addition to the inclusive practices discussed, it is also necessary to transform the traditional power structure within the classroom.

## **Transforming power differences**

The second major theme to come from the focus-group analysis was transforming power differences. We view power from a critical perspective meaning that power is a relational

and negotiated process between student and teacher, and that power is something to be used, transferred, and transformed (Dannels, 2015). This power transformation exists in a relational and sociocultural context. Higher education exists in a system of structural racism, sexism, conscious and unconscious biases, and white supremacy. Thus, sociocultural and structural factors may disempower some instructors in similar ways that they disempower some students (Calventea et al., 2020). Students told us that they noticed the lack of faculty of color (FOC) at our institution, as well as the tokenization and extra work given to FOC/queer faculty. It may not feel safe for a LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) instructor to disclose personal relationship information in class. A BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) instructor may face difficulties being seen as an expert in their subject matter. A nontenure track faculty member or a graduate teaching assistant may not receive the same support as their tenured colleagues. Strategies that work at one time may not work at another because power is a process. These issues directly or indirectly affect the classroom environment, which makes collaboration between students and instructors all the more important (Atay & Trebing, 2017).

The question is: How and when can an instructor transform his or her power in a class considering cultural, sociocultural, and institutional structures? While students said they understood that power was not often equal in the classroom, they suggested ways for instructors to minimize or equalize the power difference between the roles of “teacher” and “student.” From a critical communication pedagogy approach, instructors should talk *with* students, not *at* them; they should treat students like individuals and teach dialogically by using verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Students felt included when they connected with other students and were recognized as learners *and* people. Feeling connected is an outcome of what instructors do in their classrooms, so having a good relationship with instructors matters. Sometimes, this can mean having an instructor that looks like you. A participant explained that “People feel comfortable with individuals who have been through similar situations, so students will seek out a professor of color when they’re having issues with racism.” Another example is when a participant said, “I did have a couple professors ... and they had us like write down our name, pronouns and maybe like our major and something we liked and we turned them in and they would keep them and reference them throughout the rest of the semester.” Students want to be seen and valued as a student and also as an individual who comes to class with their own experiences and opinions.

Transforming power occurred when instructors valued students’ input and treated them as capable individuals. Students feel included in the classroom when instructors are “kind and they treat you like a person, rather than just another number. That’s what I appreciate the most and is what makes me feel much more welcome in the classroom.” The ways in which instructors conceptualize and respect students as capable adults can also transform the power within the classroom. One participant noted, “One thing I like is whenever professors actually look at you as a capable adult, and look at you as like, you actually know what you’re talking about.” This same participant hinted at the importance of being able to add to the discussion or even lead the discussion by drawing from their own experiences and expertise.

Conversely, some classrooms can be exclusive in the sense that students are at the receiving end of one-way information. One participant described an inclusive classroom as one where instructors understand that “the classroom is a coproduction of knowledge.

I will come to class with my opinion and you come with yours and we'll collaborate and meet in the middle." Classrooms can become exclusive when instructors do not work with students to transform power structures and engage in reciprocal conversation.

Instructor approachability led students to feel like their opinions mattered. Respect summarizes this theme. Transforming power differences through class energy was accomplished by building interpersonal relationships that respected the individual's whole self, helped students feel connected, and promoted learning. For instance, one participant explained that "I do way better in the classes where I have a good relationship with my professor. ... it's really hard to juggle if you don't have a support system." Participants understand that hierarchy exists, and they are there to learn from instructors with more knowledge and experience than they have. However, they also wanted to be respected for who they are and what they bring to the table. Several participants expressed that while boundaries between instructors and students are necessary within the classroom, it is also important to establish a connection. For instance, a participant stated that "I like it when professors are not afraid to be open in the classroom but are still professional." They want to build relationships with instructors that demonstrate mutual respect. They want to feel comfortable talking with instructors about coursework but also about other concerns in their lives. Another participant noted that importance of instructors being open about themselves:

The professors I like the most are more personable, and ... talk about themselves ... It does make me feel welcome to their office hours, and it makes me feel like I can just talk to them ... if I have any problems ... they're not just some powerful figure.

Students felt included when they connected with other students and the instructor and were recognized as learners *and* people. Feeling connected is an outcome of what instructors do in their classrooms, so having a good relationship with instructors matters.

The findings demonstrate that inclusivity is a semester-long collaborative journey. As one participant stated, "inclusivity isn't a chore," but rather a collaborative process of creating and sustaining a positive learning environment. In the following section, we detail what we consider to be best practices in inclusive pedagogy.

## Development of best practices

Given the focus on practices in the community, the research team took the findings from the focus group discussions with students to design and implement best practices for inclusive university classrooms. Our analysis of student focus-group discussions centered on what students are looking for in an inclusive classroom, what they want instructors to know, what happens in an inclusive classroom, and how instructor behaviors and course materials influence the classroom environment. We transform theory into practice by offering tangible recommendations that can make students' classroom experiences better. A welcoming and inclusive classroom means centering student experiences, identities, and concerns; being a reflexive and responsive instructor; and focusing on the interpersonal relationship between instructor and students. Our study extends immediacy research by offering a student-centered list of best practices that instructors can implement into their face-to-face and online classrooms to promote inclusivity for students with all identities and backgrounds.

We offer the following as best practices for an inclusive classroom (see Table 2). Students in our focus groups indicated that they want their online classes to resemble the traditional classroom as much as possible, so we offer suggestions for both online and face-to-face classes. At our institution, we presented the best practices in a table containing examples (see Table 2) at a virtual conference on flex teaching in July 2020. We are also collaborating with students to make short videos featuring students discussing

**Table 2.** Best Practices for Inclusive Classroom Instruction

Action	Definition	Example
Contact and Learn about Students	Engage with students and show interest in who they are	Email or connect with students before semester begins, identify needs of students, send out get-to-know-you survey
Set the Tone	Set a classroom tone of respect and safety	Show respect for all students, discuss what a safe environment looks like
Be Immediate	Communication behaviors that enhance the relationship between student and instructor	Pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication from students, reinforce respect
Encourage Introductions and Set Group Atmosphere	Build community with and among students	Have students introduce themselves to each other, use discussion board for introductions in online classes, build connection through activities
Explain Syllabus and Expectations	Be ordered and systematic in the preparation of class and throughout the semester, be clear about what is expected from students	Provide a detailed syllabus, go over syllabus in class, discuss campus and community resources
Self-Disclosure	Be open about oneself, vulnerable when appropriate	Introduce oneself using pronouns, build trust by reciprocating what you are asking students to do
Be Approachable	Be open, respect students' identities and experiences	Treat students as capable learners; be easy to talk to, open, welcoming, flexible; be open to feedback; learn students' names; connect with students
Stay Engaged	Maintain strong presence in students' lives	Respond to emails, be present during office hours, stay connected to students in online classes
Providing Resources	Continue to provide resources to students	Help students connect to academic assistance, refer students to community services
Provide Trigger Warnings	Notify students ahead of time when sensitive material will be discussed	Let students know before providing a reading, showing a film, or planning a discussion if the material will be sensitive and perhaps exacerbate a trauma
Make Teaching Materials Inclusive	Provide teaching materials that engage and meet the needs of all students	Provide code of ethics in the syllabus; use the university learning management system to post PowerPoints, notes, assignments online
Transform Power Differences	Transform power in the classroom, be open to multiple opinions	Acknowledge one's own areas of power as well as how structural factors serve to disempower some instructors, treat students as individuals, see students as learners <i>and</i> people, encourage collaboration
Be Reflexive	The process of reflecting on oneself as a teacher	Reflect on one's own perceptions and how an instructor might exclude someone from engagement with the class, transform energy in the classroom by engaging in dialogue and keeping communication open
Engage Student Standpoints	Respect and appreciate what makes students unique and how their backgrounds and experiences contribute to them as learners	Include everyone in class discussions, ask students to examine their own positions of power and privilege
Build Relationships	Connect with students to facilitate learning	Use immediate and supportive communication, help students connect with each other and you as instructor, be personable and demonstrate that you care about the students as people and scholars



inclusive and welcoming practices, in addition to developing additional workshops based on our findings for our community.

## Reflexivity as teaching practice

Reflexivity requires instructors to embrace their knowledge limitations and grapple with the ways that their own perceptions of gender, identity, race, and class may be exclusionary (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019; Griffin & Chávez, 2012). Dannels (2015) urges teachers to embrace and commit to asking questions and addressing concerns as part of a reflective teaching practice by considering their own assumptions, context, role, and experience level. “I maintain that what will sustain you and fuel your teaching development is acknowledging questions and concerns and proactively creating habits of thinking, feeling, communicating, and reflecting that address them” (Dannels, 2015, p. 3). Reflexivity is also part of a practice of transforming energy in the classroom and understanding power as a reciprocal process in the teacher–student relationship. Dialogue is crucial in power relationships, which means that inclusive practices are dialogic; both instructors and students have a purposeful role to play. “Your role is not to establish authority or power but to open conversation, an acknowledgement (not necessarily an agreement) of the ways in which all participants in the classroom assign meaning to the world” (Dannels, 2015, p. 51). While instructors should take the lead in creating an inclusive classroom environment, students also function as environment cocreators. Instructors can promote inclusivity in the classroom by not only being reflexive themselves but also motivating their students to analyze the relationships between “power, privilege, oppression, resistance, and resilience as they relate to structure and interpersonal experiences” (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019, p. 195). The goal is to use dialogue and classroom practices’ power to transform and change.

## Student–instructor relationship

As we discovered through this work, the relationship between students and instructors is paramount. Instructors’ use of immediate and supportive communication behaviors is key to creating a welcoming and inclusive classroom. Students emphasized the importance of relationships and feeling connected to each other and to the instructor. When an instructor begins the semester by introducing themselves, stating their pronouns, and sharing a little personal information, students feel comfortable and view the instructor as open and approachable. Having an instructor who is personable and communicates care for students is essential to building a relationship where the student feels they can ask for help, go to office hours, share what is going on in their life, and, therefore, potentially get more from the class. When instructors lay the groundwork for class on day one and reinforce it through the semester, students feel safe to be themselves, safe to express their opinions, and safe to learn. Instructors can ask students for their pronouns in a way that they do not feel put on the spot, define hate speech and explain that it will not be tolerated in the classroom, and be cognizant of topics that might trigger students who have experienced trauma.

Immediate communication enables students to feel safe, respected, and connected. Students want to be able to provide feedback to instructors throughout the semester and appreciate instructors’ responsiveness to that feedback. Having an instructor who is

willing to adapt their teaching style, is flexible in assignments, and values student opinions and contributions encourages students to stretch themselves. This does not mean that instructors need to have in-depth conversations or indiscriminately self-disclose with every student during every class—with large lectures and online classes that would be near impossible. We recognize the roles that culture and sociocultural factors play in an instructor's ability and willingness to disclose personal information and to develop such relationships, and the additional emotional labor for women, LGBTQ, and BIPOC who are disadvantaged by the structural issues in higher education and larger cultural discourses about gender, race, ethnicity, and ability (Calafell, 2007).

Developing interpersonal relationships can manifest in different ways, such as reassuring glances, smiling, and checking in with the student from time to time (Frymier & Houser, 2000). There should be enough of a foundation that if the student has a question or an issue relative to class, that student should feel comfortable reaching out to their instructor for help (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Witt et al., 2004). Instructors make up a part of students' social networks and thus are sources of social support in times of need. When this support and inclusivity do not exist, students may feel invalidated and unmotivated. For this reason, interpersonal communication in the form of teacher immediacy is an essential aspect of student success and a vital element of inclusive practices.

Making students feel welcome is about creating an environment of inclusion with instructor–student relationships as the foundation taking into consideration age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and socioeconomic status. We do not seek to provide a universal or exhaustive set of practices that instructors can implement to create an inclusive environment. Instead, we emphasize that collaboration between the instructor and students is key; they should coconstruct the type of environment that works best for their class. “Your power in the classroom is not, at the end of the day, about how you manage disruptions or distractions but about the part you play in transforming energy” (Dannels, 2015, p. 67).

Educational discourses and classroom structures have typically been crafted for traditional students; however, limited research has addressed these immediate behaviors in relation to the changing demographics. Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2019) suggest that “immediacy ought to be interrogated further to determine best practices for improving it,” particularly in online and hybrid classroom contexts (p. 8). While online classes' flexibility and asynchronous learning is welcome, participants indicated that they prefer the online courses to resemble the traditional classroom as much as possible. From the students' perspectives, online learning does not mean that they necessarily want distance from the instructor and their peers. For instance, the nontraditional student participants said that they take online courses to better fit with their life, not because they want to avoid the face-to-face classroom. The current study expands on LeMaster and Johnson's (2019) request to “unlearn what we think we know” (p. 192). As instructors, we strive to create academic spaces that we *think* students want; however, a more constructive approach is to give students what they *need*. As our list of best practices conveys, students need their instructors to be immediate, personable, committed to making the class organized and welcoming, and understanding of students' situations. Because teaching and learning discourses vary based on students' social situatedness, Hinck and Tighe (2020) call for future research that centers on the discourses of different groups, including “international students, first-generation students, women and nonbinary students, among others”

(p. 15). Focusing on student interests, accommodating different learners, and engaging with students to meet their needs, build an inclusive environment. “Providing accommodation for all, the instructor recognizes that each student has a unique learning style, preferences in instruction, and needs and advantages that can be identified and adapted to create the most enabling classroom” (Quinlan et al., 2012, p. 229). By “providing accommodation for all,” Quinlan et al. (2012) advocate teaching strategies that can benefit all students: “Good teaching is good teaching” (p. 231).

Through FPAR, the present study answered this call by engaging in a dialogue with these groups. Our focus groups revealed that students want their instructors to recognize that they enter the class from their own respective standpoints (Hartsock, 1983). These standpoints necessitate a classroom atmosphere where the instructor acknowledges students’ educational needs and roles outside of the classroom (Hinck & Tighe, 2020). By engaging in dialogic communication with their students, instructors can transform classroom environments into more inclusive spaces.

### Limitations and future directions

Despite the advantages of focus groups, there are also some drawbacks. Individuals who are shy and/or quiet might get overshadowed or influenced by dominant group members. There can be an emphasis on one topic preventing the group from exploring a range of ideas (Munday, 2013). However, focus groups do have benefits such as providing a place where individuals can discuss topics of interest and share ideas. Our focus groups consisted of a mix of graduate and undergraduate students because they attended whichever focus group best fit their schedules. In future research, conducting separate focus groups with graduate and undergraduate students seems beneficial given some unique concerns of graduate students, such as being teaching assistants and navigating the roles of teacher and student. In addition, we had four international graduate students in our focus groups, which reflects our university’s diverse graduate student population. Thus, it seems useful to consider if and how international students’ perspectives may differ from US Nationals.

We asked about ethnicity in our demographic questionnaire but had no question about race. In addition, we did not explicitly ask about ability, though students did talk about (dis)ability in the focus group discussions. In the future, explicit questions about ability and race seem warranted. Our participants spoke from their perspectives reflecting their understanding of inclusivity. This is both a limitation and a strength of this work. The participants in our focus groups reflected the diversity at our institution (see Table 1).

In conclusion, we analyzed data from the focus groups to develop best practices for instructors to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom. We believe these best practices can be a guide for instructors as they develop teaching materials, prepare for the first day of class, and conduct classes face-to-face and online. Engaging in immediacy in an inclusive class environment to build relationships with students works hand in hand with the goal of learning as we partner with students in higher education.

### Note

1. We use trans\* as an umbrella term to refer to those who permanently or periodically dis-identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. This is also the term preferred by the student in our story and by our university’s Queer-Trans Student Union.

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