

2017

## Practicing Inclusive Teaching Strategies in a Storytelling Class

Zhihui Sophia Geng

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*, [sgeng@csbsju.edu](mailto:sgeng@csbsju.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters>

---

### Recommended Citation

Geng, Zhihui Sophia (2017) "Practicing Inclusive Teaching Strategies in a Storytelling Class," *Headwaters*: Vol. 30, 205-210.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol30/iss1/20>

This II. Roundtable Discussion - From Intention to Action: Building an Inclusive Community is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Headwaters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

## Practicing Inclusive Teaching Strategies in a Storytelling Class

### Abstract

In this essay, the author shares several teaching strategies that she adopted in her Chinese folklore and mythology class that she believes are instrumental in building an inclusive and equitable learning environment. These teaching strategies include in-class reflective writing and discussion, inclusive group projects, and the design of a grading rubric with inclusivity as a component. At the end of the essay, the author also gives two tips to her fellow colleagues regarding including potentially marginalized students.

### Keywords

Inclusivity, equity, diverse student body, storytelling, teaching strategies

As a first-generation Chinese American who experienced immigration first-hand, I care deeply about the “newcomers” and the “outsiders” in our classrooms and our community. Out of this care, I have sought out development opportunities to train myself to be a better teacher in respect to inclusive and equitable pedagogies. From 2014 to 2016, I was a member of the Cultural Agility Collaboration organized by Minnesota Compass Compact, a consortium that promotes democracy and civic engagement in Minnesota’s colleges and universities and of which CSB/SJU are both members. We discussed extensively the challenges with achieving equity and inclusivity in Minnesota higher education. When I heard the good news that CSB/SJU got the Mellon grants, I was thrilled and joined the Humanities cohort. The journey with my Mellon cohort has been enriching and fulfilling. Mellon provided great learning opportunities for me and many other faculty members to find new ways to make our classrooms more

inclusive and supportive to everyone. In its workshops and reading groups, we have discussed many touchy topics such as confronting microaggressions, implicit racism, and white privilege. It prepared me and encouraged me to implement pedagogical changes and strategies to make my classrooms more welcoming and inclusive to each and every one in it.

Here I would like to share a few activities I implemented in an attempt to contribute to our ongoing endeavors to build a more inclusive learning environment. I have taught “Chinese Folklore, Myth and Legend” a number of times. It attracts a diverse student body. Academically, I have both first-year students and juniors who find this class suitable for their intercultural designation. I have Asian Studies majors and minors who have been exposed to different aspects of Asian cultures. I also have students for whom this is their first class on an Asia-related topic. Demographically, I have students from the Midwest, Texas, California, the Bahamas, Germany, the Philippines, and China. I can hardly overstate the importance of inclusivity to this course: to make each and every student feel included and valued is essential for effective teaching and learning in this class.

At the very beginning of the semester, I handed out a piece of paper to the class and asked students to write, “What privileges do you enjoy? Think in the broadest way possible.” The purpose of the exercise is to draw students’ attention to this significant question, bring the topic of privilege and equity to our regular classroom conversations, and set up the tone of welcome, inclusion, and sharing for the rest of the semester. Students wrote down the privileges largely in the order of what first came to their minds. On the top of the list were privileges associated with constitutional rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Students also noted privileges associated with living in a safe environment such as fresh water and unpolluted food. Next about half of the students wrote down privileges associated with being middle class. Examples included: “I have a warm house to live in and plenty of food to eat.” “My parents each had a car to drive and when I became of age I have always had a car to drive with gas in it too.” For those students who have studied abroad, they were more keenly aware of the privilege of travel and of

having English as their first language. For instance, a student wrote, “I grew up speaking English as my first language, which gives me an advantage in our globalized world.” Instead of their constitutional rights, students of color emphasized the privilege of receiving higher education and more specifically of being able to attend a private college like CSB/SJU. International students shared this emphasis on receiving a quality higher education as well.

After writing the privileges down, I asked each of the students to share what they had written down with the class. We also talked about the absence of race and gender in the listed privileges and the reasons behind this avoidance. Although we were discussing a challenging topic, the atmosphere was friendly and supportive. After sharing, I encouraged the class to think about how to avail themselves of their privileges to make this a better class and a better experience for everyone. Responses included: “sharing our stories and experiences;” “Respect people of different backgrounds and respect their differences;” to be “empathetic;” “can help others feel comfortable here;” “try to be open-minded about people’s experiences, opinions and work;” “be able to acknowledge others by greeting, conversation and discussion;” “to be more open and engaged with others in learning new perspectives;” “Encourage others to share their thoughts and be receptive, respectful and understanding if they choose to do so;” “We can all be respectful of each other and value what everybody has to say;” “Respect differences and each other’s opinions;” and “understand that we are all human and all want to feel as if we belong and are loved by others.” The power of this exercise lies in the fact that these words are from the bottom of the hearts of our students and their sincerity and earnestness empower our students to turn their good intentions into actuality.

Another important strategy is to have inclusivity as a component of the grading rubric and make space for students to reflect upon their performance in light of this criterion. For example, I assign group projects on the “White Snake Lady.” When analyzing different vernacular versions of this classic love story, I broke the class into two large groups. In half an hour, each group was assigned to complete the following five tasks:

1. Play out the White Snake Lady story. (performance, narration, dialogue: 5 to 6 persons)
2. Is this a myth, legend, or folktale? Why? (explanation: 1 person)
3. Get on the web to find some cultural and literary background on the story (presentation: 1 to 2 persons)
4. Compare the two versions of the story and explain which one you like better and the reasons for your preference (presentation: 3 persons)
5. Write a poem/prose narrative to retell the story (creative writing: 2 persons)

These tasks develop students' skills with presentation, argumentation, and analysis. When giving these tasks, I emphasize that this is a contest between the two large groups and I will evaluate how the groups work as a team: Have all team members' talents been utilized? How will you decide who will take on which tasks? Does everyone have a task to work on and a way to contribute to the group? Are there dominant speakers/leaders? What will you do to encourage generally quieter team members to be more vocal?

When the two large groups came to the front of the classroom to carry out the five tasks, I gave comments on, for example, how all members of the team searching for cultural and literary background on the story did in terms of cooperation, sharing, and supporting each other. I also let members of the rival group comment on their collaboration skills. After the two groups were done, I asked for volunteers to reflect upon their experiences in the group: Did you feel valued by the group? Do you think the division of labor was fair and appropriate? Could anything be changed to make it a better team? I found this activity quite effective in building an inclusive team. The students knew the criteria they would be evaluated upon. The construction of the tasks gave enough space for each student to make choices on the ways that s/he could contribute. When evaluating their work, I evaluated inclusivity

as an equally important criterion as other intellectual abilities. And finally, students were given opportunities to do self-appraisal and reflection.

I am particularly impressed by the fact that in an inclusive environment, students who were more academically prepared tended to facilitate the delegation of tasks, but chose minor roles in the performance task instead of playing the protagonists. The quieter group members began to clarify their preferences to their fellow group members and became more engaged and active.

If I have to give one piece of advice to my fellow colleagues who are committed to building an equitable classroom, it is that details matter. From the details our students discern if the instructor is really serious about the principles that s/he claims to value. Remembering fellow classmates' names is such a detail. It seems self-evident that being able to address each other with preferred names helps create a more friendly and inclusive environment. However, when we have highly managed classes with planned content to deliver and organized practices to complete, it is not easy to find the time to ensure we all know each other's names. Very often, it is the quieter students and the students with unfamiliar or exotic family names whose appellations we forget. At the beginning of the semester, I used "What is his/her name?" as an icebreaker. I will ask, "Hi Megan, do you know your classmate's name five seats away from you on the right?" If Megan did not remember, she had to tell a family tale to the class. In this way, the whole class reached out to each other during breaks to ask each other's names. For the first few sessions, they also felt the necessity to have a couple of stories up their sleeves, which is not a bad thing for a storytelling class.

I would like to comment on the silence of international students as a concluding note for this reflection essay on inclusivity. I have heard people using "respecting their cultures" to dismiss the silence of international students in their classrooms. If the international students in a class have been really quiet, no, they are not just following their cultural customs, and they are not naturally quiet. It is a sign that the classroom has not forged a

positive, friendly environment for them to feel supported enough to speak up. For the international students, it takes a lot of courage for them to express their opinions in a non-native tongue. Support from their peers and encouragement to speak out from the instructor is crucial for them to take the risk and show their vulnerability with the English language and the host culture. I found very often a simple invitation, “Zhixu, what do you think of that?” would be enough to break the silence. I often notice that once a student is invited to speak up, it is likely that the student would volunteer his/her opinions again in the rest of the class session. The more supportive the classroom atmosphere, the more vocal the students become.