



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES

Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Teaching Center

302 Philosophy Hall • Mail Code 4997 • New York, NY 10027 • 212-854-1066 • smintz@columbia.edu

Respecting Individual Difference

Diversity in the classroom takes multiple forms. We often think of diversity in demographic or group terms, such as age, class, culture, disabilities, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. But the most common involves individual difference: in background, levels of preparation, learning styles, interests, and abilities.

You aren't simply teaching one student with twenty different faces; you are teaching twenty different students, each with distinctive needs and talents, and different levels of motivation, attention, knowledge, time to devote to your class, and maturity.

Many instructors fear that the very diversity of our classes means that talented students aren't sufficiently challenged and that the weakest students determine the class' pace.

How can you provide an optimal learning environment for every student? Instead of asking whether you should teach to the top or to the middle, consider ways to meet the needs and build on the strengths of all your students. Here are some practical suggestions.

1. Get to know your students

Nothing undermines stereotypes or misconceptions quicker than simply knowing your students. Learn something about their strengths, talents, and interests and draw upon those in your interactions with them. And remember, students who feel connected to you work harder.

2. Make sure your students know why the material is worth learning.

Students who are engaged and motivated will put more effort into your course.

3. Create a classroom where student input about content and pedagogy is welcome.

No doubt you will feel uncomfortable when students criticize an aspect of your class or your teaching style. But if you are to reach them effectively, you need to encourage them to reflect critically on their own learning.

4. Vary your presentation style.

Because students have diverse learning styles, consider using a variety of instructional approaches: lectures, discussion, PowerPoint presentations, audio (including music), video, charts and graphs, simulations, and images.

5. Highlight critical concepts and skills.

Make sure that all students master key concepts and skills.

6. Approach the material interactively.

Inquiry-based instruction, hands-on experiments, project and problem-based learning.

7. Integrate small group learning into your teaching.

Collaborative and team-based learning, including pairs and small group activities, allow students to learn from their peers.

8. Don't get locked into "lock-step" teaching.

All students don't need to be doing exactly the same thing at the same time. You might adopt "differentiated instruction," where one group pursues one activity while you work closely with another group on particular skills or concepts.

9. Create a support system.

Some students need additional help if they are to succeed. You can refer them to student support services, but also consider holding special sessions or creating online tutorials to address struggling students' special needs.