

Inclusive Excellence Syllabus Statements by St. Thomas Faculty

Emily Buehler, Justice and Peace Studies (Dougherty Family College)

Statement on Diverse and Inclusive Classrooms:

We will be examining texts from a wide variety of perspectives throughout the semester. Some of these texts, and even responses by classmates, may be difficult or controversial, and some content may feel very personal. We welcome this broad range of views into the classroom in order to critically examine them. You are always encouraged to respectfully challenge ideas brought up by the instructor or your classmates. In the classroom, we absolutely will not allow comments that are racist, classist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, xenophobic, or that demonstrate other forms of discriminatory and hurtful language.

I ask students to consider approaching difficult material through cultural humility, which assumes: Personal and cultural identities are complex and infinitely nuanced, and therefore we cannot make assumptions about an individual based on his/her/their membership in any particular group; and We are all impacted by embedded cultural assumptions and power relationships; as responsible community members we are called to critically examine these cultural assumption as well as our role in systems of power on an ongoing basis.

Kanishka Chowdhury, English Department

In this class, we will discuss contentious and potentially unsettling subject matter. The classroom is a space where critical dialogue forms a vital part of learning, so it is important that we engage in debate even when--or especially when--we disagree about a topic. Sadly, neither the media nor dominant political discourse provides us with a good model for informed, productive debate. All too often, we hear folks position themselves in ideological boxes, disregard scholarship on a subject, refuse to discuss its nuances, and resort to name-calling. My position on discussion, as you may have guessed, is precisely the opposite: I'd like us to be informed, thoughtful, and prepared to consider a range of views different from our own. I also want us to be aware that our own subject positions (based on race, class, sexuality, gender, nationality, religion, etc.) play a vital role in how we perceive particular topics. None of us can transcend these positions, but we must be aware that they play an important role in shaping our views. This critical self-consciousness should also extend to the ways in which we engage with our peers: we should not dismiss their opinions, disparage their views, or resort to personal attacks because we choose not to see the world from their perspective. The productive tension that emerges from considering views that are different from our own is a crucial part of learning and of becoming an engaged, thoughtful, and responsible citizen. (I use this last word not in its legal sense but in its "civic" sense, which denotes a person



participating in public dialogue and contributing to building a vital and dynamic democratic space.) We must listen, debate, and challenge, and, importantly, prepare to engage in informed discussions by doing the hard work of studying course materials, paying attention to others' perspectives, thinking carefully, writing thoughtfully, and, when necessary, reconsidering our own positions and beliefs.

Peter Gregg, Communication and Journalism

Part of what makes university life interesting, challenging, exciting, and rewarding is a willingness to engage the complexity of human experience and background. In this class, that complexity also contributes to our creativity and potential as producers of media content. After all, we write what we know and experience.

For our class to be successful, everyone should feel they can contribute and learn in a supportive environment. We will treat every individual with respect, dignity, and civility. Each of us shares the responsibility for making our class and the university into a positive and better place to live, work, and learn.

For the production space and the classroom to be successful, we need to make sure that our insights, analysis, comments, and production work is respectful of differences. While we may be critical and point out weaknesses of argument or work it is not a personal assessment. We need to be sure that our work does not discriminate or create a hostile environment. Respect each other's right to their opinions and their individuality.

There is zero tolerance for racist, sexist, homophobic or other discriminatory language and behavior in our class. No one should ever feel that they have been targeted or threatened in our class. Know that sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and/or any other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any concerns.

Michelle Hirschboeck, Philosophy

Diversity is a philosophical advantage because philosophy begins from human experience, and each person in the classroom contributes a unique and valuable perspective to this endeavor. Learning requires humility: we must be open to new and different ideas and willing to examine—and possibly change—our own. To this end, we will strive to build a class community where each member is respected, included and engaged, which welcomes passionate debate and critical arguments, but does not tolerate personal attacks or prejudice of any kind.

Kurt Illig, Biology

What makes a college course special? To me, it is special because it is a place in the world where we come together as a group, not to convince each other of ideology or to defend our own notions, but to explore. We gather to explore new knowledge together, to engage with issues in new ways, to share views within a community of learners, and thereby come to know the world through each others' eyes. By enrolling in a course, we ask to join a community that will engage with us, challenge us, and change us.

This does not happen by chance. Each of us brings a unique set of experiences, values and beliefs to this community. Our responsibility in this setting is to share honestly the process and products of our own intellectual labors, and to engage respectfully with each other in the work of improving that process. We acknowledge that "correct" answers may belie flawed reasoning as easily as intellectual prowess can produce fallacy. We offer our own ideas knowing that they will be challenged, and we challenge each others' ideas to sharpen our reasoning skills. We do not seek homogeneity of thought, but rather excellence in critical thinking. Our work will celebrate the unlimited capabilities of the human mind, and we will celebrate errors in the same way we celebrate the intellectual forces that correct them.

In this course, we will discuss controversial topics. This is not a place to attack, judge, demean, or belittle each other, nor to defend our own viewpoints as absolute truth. Each and every voice in the classroom is a human voice, and brings with it an authentic contribution. At times, the value of all voices may not be easy to appreciate; during these times, we will challenge ourselves to think more deeply about the human experience being expressed. Even caustic and offensive ideas have value in the humanity that brings them to the discussion. And while we will not censure such ideas, we will not attack each other personally, as derisive comments of any kind have no place in our discussions; each member of our community is valuable and worthy of respect.

Patricia Maddox, Sociology

Throughout this course we will be discussing topics around power, privilege, oppression, and identity both historically and present day. While I understand that we all come into this course having our own values and beliefs, we as a class will be inclusive to all regardless of, race, ethnic origin, sexuality, gender identity, class status, national origin, age, physical and mental ability. As a course baseline, we will acknowledge that racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, classism, ableism, and ageism do in fact exist and intersect in a variety of ways when looking at power and privilege. In addition to being inclusive of all voices, our class will be set up as a Brave Space. Brave Spaces asks each of us to challenge our own long-standing beliefs by seeking to better understand others and their beliefs through a process of listening, respectfully questioning and self-reflecting. It takes us acting bravely and sometimes feeling uncomfortable to fully open ourselves up to learning about the complexities associated with topics of power and privilege. I hope you see by the

end of the semester how transformative this process can be. Therefore, if you ever feel like your voice isn't being heard come and see me and we can make sure that your voice is inserted into our learning community. After all, true social justice comes from us dialoguing with one another. On this note, I am reminded of a powerful quote by James Baldwin:

"Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free - he has set himself free - for higher dreams, for greater privileges."

Salina Renninger, Graduate Psychology Program

Culture of Awareness and Respect:

In order for learning to occur and for students to feel comfortable to explore new ideas and perspectives, it is important that we work together to cultivate a classroom of awareness and respect for each other. We do not have to agree on everything, but we must be thoughtful and intentional in our appearance, our word, and our behaviors. This means that students and the instructor should not wear clothing that might be deemed offensive or hurtful to others (e.g., clothing with mascots that demean Native American culture), should be aware of their use of language (e.g., phrases or sayings that perpetuate stereotypes), and be thoughtful how certain behaviors may be interpreted (e.g., interrupting). Additionally, it is important for students to consider their own perspectives and behaviors and those of others from a contextual lens. Therefore, if something is unclear or you disagree, it can be helpful to attempt to acknowledge one's own worldview and to understand the worldview of the other person before jumping to judgment. Finally, we may not always be comfortable in the conversations we have. This is different from having a negative experience. Learning is sometimes quite uncomfortable. So, if you find yourself feeling uncomfortable, attempt to discern if this is a moment of challenging learning or truly a negative experience.

Jen Trost, Sociology (Dougherty Family College)

Collective Responsibility for Addressing Privilege and Oppression:

We acknowledge that racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression exist. Any critical examination of oppression requires us to recognize that we have been systematically taught misinformation about our own group as well as about members of other groups. It also means that, if we are a part of a dominant group (e.g., white, male, upper/middle class, able-bodied, and/or heterosexual), we have unearned privilege that carries into the classroom and for which we are responsible. Being responsible means examining our words and actions and considering how we can be allies to others. We cannot be blamed



for the misinformation that we have learned and for taking unconscious advantage of our privilege, but we will be held responsible for repeating misinformation or engaging in oppressive behavior once we have learned otherwise.

Commitment to Inclusive Excellence Statement:

In this class, students of any ethnicity, race, nationality, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and disability are strongly encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences during class discussions. Building an inclusive environment where all students can share their perspectives is key to the learning and discourse expected at St. Thomas. If at any time you feel you are unable to share your experiences, please contact me, so we can discuss opportunities for change and creation of a better learning space.

Carey Winkler, St. Thomas School of Social Work

Courageous/Brave Space:

We will work together to co-create a courageous/brave space in the classroom and in our on-line interactions. We acknowledge that racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, cisgenderism, and other forms of oppression exist. Any critical examination of oppression requires us to recognize that we have been systematically misinformed about various identities. It also means that, if we are a part of a dominant group (e.g. white, male, upper/middle class, able-bodied, cisgender, and/or heterosexual), we have unearned privilege that carries into the classroom and for which we are responsible. Being responsible means examining our words and actions and considering how we can be better allies. We will hold ourselves accountable for repeating misinformation or engaging in and perpetuating oppressive behavior once we have learned otherwise.

Bernie Armada, Communication & Journalism

A Brave Space in the Inclusive Classroom (Note: adapted from Dr. Dominic Longo's "brave space in this classroom" statement)

The dialogues that we have in this course, both in class and online, will go into some of our personal values and beliefs, including ones that we and perhaps our families hold most dear. The content and questions on which our dialogues will focus will relate to the communicative dimensions of sex, race, our bodies, the erotic, gender, culture, and political power. We will be working with material that may include controversial content such as violence, murder, misogyny, graphic depictions of hetero/homo-sexuality, racism, and anti-Semitism. Our texts may also contain language that could be offensive to some students. You should be aware that we will not avoid these ideas/words/images or skirt these issues in class discussion. If you feel that any frank discussions we have might cause you excessive offense or discomfort, please consider whether this course is appropriate for you.

All ethnicities, nationalities, socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, gender expressions, sexual orientations body types, sexes, religious affiliations and non-affiliations, theological affiliations and agnosticisms, including atheism, are welcome here. Among us are undoubtedly different experiences worldviews, and relationships toward the above classifications. To the extent that we each bring forward our unique and full selves, we will deepen the learning for ourselves and each other.

For the sake of personal growth and learning about communication, I aspire as a professor and facilitator to co-create with you a space in our classroom that elicits bravery from each of us. To show up with our full selves, to articulate our actual ways of seeing the world (as opposed to what/how others tell us we should see the world), to listen with a mind and heart open to truly different viewpoints. All of this takes profound courage and a willingness to think on one's own. I urge you to take risks for the sake of learning and connecting with one another, and to take responsibility for your intentions and your actual impact on others. I will do my absolute best to do the same. Whatever controversies may come up, let us engage them and each other with civility.