

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom

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## Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom

### Abstract

"Culturally sensitive Christian instructors see their students as image bearers of Christ, as kingdom citizens, and they focus on all aspects of their students, not just their color."

Posting about educating students in a diverse world from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/creating-a-culturally-sensitive-classroom/>

### Keywords

In All Things, Christian education, Christian teachers, cultural sensitivity

### Disciplines

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# in things

September 13, 2018

## Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom

**Barb Hoekstra**

“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (**Acts 26:19**).

“If we lose ‘the heavenly vision’ God has given us, we alone are responsible — not God. We lose the vision because of our own lack of spiritual growth. If we do not apply our beliefs about God to the issues of everyday life, the vision God has given us will never be fulfilled. The only way to be obedient to ‘the heavenly vision’ is to give our utmost for His highest— our best for His glory. This can be accomplished only when we make a determination to continually remember God’s vision.” —Oswald Chambers

In the book of Revelation, a heavenly vision is presented. It is a vision for which we as educators are partly responsible. We have unique opportunities to give “our best for Christ’s glory” by creating culturally sensitive classrooms.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! (Revelation 7:9-10).

In this vision, people from every nation and tribe stand together before the throne of God. How can we work toward this same vision in our classrooms today? This vision has nothing to do with the relativism of today’s multiculturalism, which reduces people to a self-proclaimed identity; rather, it includes a diversity that has its identity in Christ. To fulfill this vision educationally, teachers will not only love their students as neighbors, but also help and encourage classmates to love each other as well.

Now that you know my intent, it would be helpful to back up and give you a bit of context for my passion. I am a white, female professor of Education teaching at Dordt College, a predominately-white institution. I have had the opportunity to teach courses on diversity, multiculturalism, and learner differences for over fifteen years. I feel called to model and share the heavenly vision stated above. Unfortunately, I often stumble along and, in the process, I embarrass my students of color and myself. Fortunately, when students know you love them and have their best interests at heart, they are usually gracious and often very good correctors.

A few years ago, a group of Dordt professors who teach diversity courses got together with students of color and had conversations about experiences in Dordt College classrooms. This meeting was an instructive, humbling, and glorious exercise. The information from those conversations combined with lessons learned over the years form the basis for the suggestions and cautions that follow. I am writing this article for instructors who may find themselves in a context similar to mine to offer modest ways to point toward the heavenly Revelation vision.

Instructors who have a heart for students in general tend to make all students, regardless of color or other differences feel welcome and comfortable. They build a caring community so that students get to know each other as quickly as possible and are comfortable with each other and can care for one another. David Smith, author of *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom* suggests teachers spend ten minutes privately with each of their students at the beginning of a semester.<sup>1</sup> Sharing this time with students allows the instructor to create familiarity and trust. It also helps them avoid public mistakes and assists in identifying and using students' gifts. This shared time will also help teachers learn students' names and pronunciations. Ten minutes spent in this way enables teachers to make connections between course material and their students' lives. When instructors get to know their students personally, they avoid making assumptions about them or their culture.

All people come to teaching and learning from a specific vantage point. It is understandable that here in North America many of us see through a Western and perhaps a Eurocentric lens as a default. However, culturally sensitive teachers try to understand and occasionally present a variety of cultural viewpoints.

Some students like to talk about their culture, background, and experiences; others do not. Attentive teachers know their students well enough to recognize this. When an instructor wants students of color to share culture-specific thoughts in class, the instructor waits for students to offer (good) or asks students privately ahead of time (better). Culturally sensitive teachers avoid spotlighting, the practice of asking students to speak for their entire culture or ethnicity. Spotlighting can give all students the impression that cultural or racial issues are the only topic in which such students are versed.

All students need a healthy dose of self-esteem to speak in class, but perhaps even more so when they are from a non-dominant culture. When students' English-language skills are still developing, a sensitive instructor gives adequate time for students to prepare a verbal

response. Acclimating to a new setting can be very tiring for anyone. Speaking and learning in a non-dominant language is exhausting.

It is easy to expect underachievement or overachievement from students based on biases or stereotypes. Culturally sensitive instructors will not make assumptions about where students are from or what their strengths or weaknesses may be. Instructors get to know students as individuals. Many international students have large goals and high aspirations. Instructors can help students meet their goals by having high expectations for all students.

Racism and classism are very complex topics. Culturally sensitive teachers do not give their students the impression the topics are simple with simple solutions and they openly share questions and concerns about these topics.

Culturally sensitive teachers address the situation when a student says or does something racially hurtful or uninformed in class. While potentially awkward, failing to address such lapses well may unknowingly condone the offensive comment or behavior. Instructors will lose credibility with all students when they do not call out unacceptable behavior. The instructor takes charge of their classroom.

Culturally sensitive Christian instructors see their students as image bearers of Christ, as kingdom citizens, and they focus on all aspects of their students, not just their color. These instructors know they have opportunities to help their students make sense of and have hope for the diverse world. Culturally sensitive Christian instructors celebrate differences and help students celebrate the good of their culture rather than only giving students opportunities to defend or explain it.

According to Paul David Tripp in his book *New Morning Mercies*, God puts us in relationships for His purposes: “You are the look on Christ’s face. You are the tones of his voice. You are the touch of his hands. You are the physical representation of his grace. This is your mission in every relationship of your life—to make the grace of the invisible King visible.”<sup>2</sup>

I hope we will teach with cultural sensitivity not because it is politically correct or due to cultural pressure or to avoid embarrassment. Let us teach with sensitivity because we seek first the Kingdom of God and share His heavenly vision.