Inclusive Pedagogy in the Academic Writing Classroom: Cultivating Communities of Belonging

Shawna Shapiro
Middlebury College, USA

Abstract

This practice-oriented article considers two questions: What does higher education research tell us about student conceptions and experiences with inclusivity? What are the implications of this research for academic writing classrooms and curricula? I first review key themes and findings from research on the nature of social inclusion in higher education, including interviews conducted with undergraduates at my institution. I then consider how academic writing scholars have (and have not) taken up the concept of inclusivity within our policies, curricula, and instruction. Finally, I identify four areas we can focus on as a way to deepen our commitment to inclusive pedagogy: building community, inviting lived experience, preparing students for discomfort, and talking openly about equity. I conclude with examples of how I am working toward those goals in my own teaching practice.

Introduction: Inclusivity in Higher Education

In recent years, the terms *inclusion* and *inclusivity*[1] have become prominent within higher education in North America and Europe (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2019; Kottmann et al., 2019). *Inclusion* has been defined in a variety of ways: Many institutions use the term to refer to issues of access and support for students with "special needs," including those with physical or cognitive disabilities (Matthews, 2009 Sachs & Schreurer, 2011). However, the term can also refer more broadly to *all* students' experiences of connectedness and belonging within educational communities (Johnson et al., 2007). Some scholars – particularly in European contexts – refer to this second conception as *social inclusion* (e.g., Gidley et al., 2010; Goldingay et al., 2014). In this article, I consider how the growing body of research on this latter type of inclusion, including findings from interviews with undergraduates at my own institution (Shapiro, 2018; 2019a)[2], can inform the teaching of academic writing in tertiary/postsecondary settings.

One challenge researchers face in studying inclusivity is that social inclusion is a highly subjective phenomenon. As Sengupta et al. (2019) explain, it is both "a state and an experience that is nurtured with a sense of connection, care, and trust" (p. 5). In other words, if students do not *feel* connected, cared about, etc., they are unlikely to experience their institution (or program or course) as inclusive. When asked to explain inclusivity in their own words, students at my institution – a small, liberal arts college in the northeastern United States – used similar affective language. One said that the basis of inclusivity is "feeling safe and comfortable." Another said

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[1] Throughout this article, I alternate between the terms inclusion and inclusivity, in order to be consistent with the terminology used by secondary sources.

[2] This research was reviewed by the ethics board at my institution, and all participants (N = 35) gave written consent for their participation. Interview questions focused on student conceptions of and experiences with inclusivity, both in the classroom and on the college campus. Most interviews were conducted by research assistants, who also assisted with data analysis.

that in a fully inclusive environment, "Everyone's happy. There's no discrimination. There's no tension between anyone." These representative comments suggest that instructors must consider students' emotional experiences – not just their intellectual development – within an inclusive approach to pedagogy.

Another key finding from educational research is that inclusion is connected to – but not synonymous with – diversity. Students not only want to be at institutions that are demographically diverse; they also want to *engage with* that diversity in meaningful ways (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Gannon, 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). As a common adage among diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) experts goes, diversity is counting people, while inclusion is making people count. Thus, institutions committed to inclusion must employ "organizational strategies and practices that promote meaningful social and academic interactions among persons and groups who differ in their experiences, their views, and their traits" (Tienda, 2013, p. 467). Students at my institution have expressed a similar view, suggesting that inclusivity must be cultivated intentionally – not assumed to happen automatically. As one participant put it, "it's not so much like a place is just open to anyone, but instead that anyone is welcomed in that place."

Both experts and students see the classroom as an important site for this meaningful engagement with diversity (Gibbs et al., 2019; Gannon, 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). While most instructors envision their classrooms as places where students engage across difference, research suggests that without the proper set up and skill set, this critical engagement may actually increase alienation – in particular for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Sue et al., 2009). Instructors must therefore create the conditions within which students are willing and able to take intellectual and emotional risks – making the classroom a "brave space" (Pawlowski, 2018).[3]

Even seemingly minor interventions, such as seating arrangements, can significantly improve the quality of students' classroom experiences (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Gibbs et al., 2019). A number of participants in my research noted that they prefer sitting in a circle, so that, as one put it, "We can all see each other [and] everybody can share something." Research has also suggested that students want (and may need) instructors to intervene when tensions run high (e.g., Sue et al., 2009). Students interviewed at my institution echoed this point: "Professors should be promoting an environment in which each student is respected and embraced by their peers," one said. Another put it more bluntly: "[Instructors] have to make the call of when to act and when not to, but they should do their job and protect students."

Course design and curriculum also play a role in facilitating inclusion. Studies show that students feel a greater sense of belonging in their classrooms and programs of study when course materials include diverse perspectives, and instructors use activities and assignments that invite students to draw on their identities and lived experiences (e.g., Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; Jehangir, 2010). This point was echoed by an interview participant who said, "[Students] have a lot of different identities, and the more that you can bring that into the classroom, the more that you can support students outside of the classroom."

A final key finding from inclusivity research is that students want and need instructors to recognize and name the unlevel playing field of higher education (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2019; Ng, 2003). As explained by one interviewee, professors need to "acknowledg[e] that not everyone comes from the same background educationally…and not everyone had access to the same resources growing up." This finding might seem counter-intuitive to some instructors who worry that students from less privileged backgrounds would feel "singled out" by such talk. But I have found the opposite to be true: Talking openly about issues of access and equity normalizes student struggles and counteracts the tendency many students have toward self-blame and isolation.

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[3] The term "brave space" has been proposed as an alternative to the discourse of 'safe space', which some scholars have criticized as being overly simplistic and/or limiting from a pedagogical perspective (e.g., Palfrey, 2017).

I have only skimmed the surface here of the scholarly landscape on inclusion in higher education. But I have highlighted some features of that landscape that are relevant to our work as teachers of academic writing. Before drawing links between the two, I will first consider the question: *What does current scholarship in our field(s) say about inclusivity as a feature of academic writing pedagogy?*

Inclusivity and the Academic Writing Classroom

Within tertiary/postsecondary settings, the word *inclusive* usually refers more to the structure or design of writing courses and programs than to the experiences of students in those courses and programs (e.g., Chiu & Rodriguez-Falcon, 2018; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). In other words, we tend to talk more about the *what* of inclusive policies, programs, and curricula than about the *how* of classroom instruction. Researchers have shown, for example, that punitive or regressive program policies can decrease students' sense of belonging in higher education (e.g., Melles et al., 2005; Moos & Van Zanen, 2019; Shapiro, 2012). In terms of curriculum, similarly, "inclusive" usually refers to a shift away from "remedial" or skills-based approaches, and toward a more pluralistic understanding of academic literacies within and across disciplines (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Wingate, 2015). This shift is informed by a growing awareness of the important role that academic literacy plays in facilitating students' socialization into disciplines and institutions (Duff, 2010; Krause, 2001; Street, 2004).

Some scholar-practitioners have called for more critical attention to the power dynamics that play out during this academic socialization process (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis et al., 2016). This has led to curriculum models such as Critical English for Academic Purposes (CEAP; e.g., Benesch, 2001; Morgan, 2009), in which students learn the "rules of the game" but also explore how those rules are socially constructed and often exclusionary (see also Canagarajah, 2002). While "inclusive" is not always the word used to frame these approaches, they are clearly in alignment with the goals of social inclusion discussed earlier.

In recent years, there has also been an increased focus on *linguistic* inclusion in the writing classroom, including pedagogical approaches that recognize and build on students' linguistic repertoires (e.g., Brinkschulte et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2019; Horner et al., 2011). By treating linguistic diversity as a resource, scholars explain, we promote greater sense of belonging among multilingual (and multidialectal) writers and enrich the learning process for all students (Galante et al., 2019; Mazak & Carroll, 2016). Writing/literacy studies scholarship also includes examples of curricula designed to promote sense of belonging among other groups that have been traditionally marginalized, such as racial/ethnic minority students (e.g., Perryman-Clark, 2013) and LGBTQ students (e.g., Jaekel, 2017).

There is surprisingly little research within our field, however, into issues of classroom climate. This is not to say that writing teachers do not care about the dynamics of the classroom; indeed, I know the opposite to be true (in most cases, at least). But in not talking about the ways that our pedagogies and spaces contribute to social inclusion and sense of belonging, we may be missing an opportunity to highlight the importance and possibilities for our work. As Marshall et al. (2012) explain, academic writing courses have the potential to "foster a sense of belonging…recognize and respect the varied social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of students [and] promote intercultural and interlinguistic understanding and tolerance among students..." (pp. 135-136). Our courses may in fact be *particularly* well suited to creating opportunities for students' meaningful and productive engagement with diversity – a crucial ingredient for inclusivity, as discussed earlier (see also Guerra, 2016).

To help writing teachers in articulating the ways that their classroom pedagogies facilitate – or could better facilitate – social inclusion and sense of belonging, I propose the following heuristic of reflection questions:

1. How can I build a sense of community in my class throughout the term?
2. How can my class assignments and/or activities invite students to draw on their lived experiences?

3. How can I help my students prepare for and navigate the discomfort that may arise when we engage diverse perspectives?
4. How can I demonstrate (and make transparent to students) my commitment to equity?

Below, I describe how I have begun to answer the above questions in my own teaching practice, including in course design, assignment sequencing, and use of class time. My small, seminar-style courses - which stand alone and meet regularly throughout the semester - are particularly conducive to these strategies. However, I have found (and research has suggested) that many of these suggestions can be adapted for larger and/or lecture-style courses, as well as for linked courses, workshops, tutorials, and other instructional formats.

Community-building

As noted earlier, academic literacy instruction is a key part of students' socialization into tertiary/postsecondary education. Yet there are a number of ways we can enhance this socialization process by building community in our classrooms. While many of us undoubtedly use get-to-know-you ("icebreaker") activities at the start of the term, research suggests that these kinds of activities can and should be employed throughout the semester (e.g., Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011). We can in fact build community *through* the teaching of academic content. For example, I try to include at least one activity per class session that requires pair or small group interaction. Some days, we do what I call a "jigsaw survey," where each student chooses one question from a given list. They ask that question to as many other members of the class as possible within the allotted timeframe (usually about 15 minutes). In a course geared toward academic writing, questions might include: "What is one of your strengths as a writer?" or "What is one question or concern you have about the research process?" Another related activity is a peer interview, in which students engage multiple questions with the same conversation partner. In either iteration, students can report back orally or reflect in writing on what they learned.

Our classroom discussions can also be crafted with the goal of strengthening connections and not just furthering the writing process. This means thinking carefully about how to maximize student interaction. In my classes, we often do what I call "turn-and-talk," where students have the opportunity to discuss a question with one or two of their peers, before turning to larger group discussion. Other activities I use to promote sustained interaction are simulation/role-play (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012), collaborative application exercises (e.g., revising a paragraph for conciseness), and opportunities for students to serve as discussion facilitators.

Recently, I added a new strategy to my community-building toolbox: Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD). Proponents of RSD distinguish between "discussion", which can have a variety of purposes, and "dialogue," which aims to promote connection and empathy-building (Essential Partners, , 2019). First developed by family psychologists, RSD has recently gained traction among practitioners in higher education (e.g., DeTemple & Sarrouf, 2017; "Running Class Discussions", 2018). With this approach, students first agree to norms for the conversation (see more below). They then have the opportunity to reflect individually on a provocative question – usually one that elicits a personal story. (As one RSD adage goes, "Behind every belief, there is a story.") When it is time to share, students usually sit in a circle, and all have equal time to speak (or they may choose "pass" or "come back later."). Afterward, the instructor may choose to guide the class in a debrief (oral or written) about the dialogue. Whereas this approach might have seemed overly prescriptive to me in the past, my research (Shapiro, 2019a) has shown me that it is in line with best practices.

Inviting Lived Experiences

Many teachers see personal writing as a divergence from academic learning (e.g., Mahala & Swilky, 1996). However, this assumption may not take into account the social and emotional needs of students. If we aim to increase students' sense of belonging, then writing about lived

experience may be one of our most useful tools. I include at least one assignment in each course that asks students to draw on personal experience in relation to course content. These include:

1. **Thematic autobiographical essay**: In this assignment, students reflect on their past experience as an entryway into course learning. For example, in my first-year seminar entitled "Language and Social Justice," students write about how they have observed "language and power" in their personal and/or academic lives. Similarly, for a writing-focused linguistics elective entitled "English Grammar: Concepts and Controversies," students compose a "Grammar Autobiography," reflecting on experiences that have shaped their attitudes toward linguistic norms and standards. These sorts of assignments not only pique students' interest in course content; they also highlight the knowledge that students already possess. Students sometimes reference or even read aloud from these essays during class discussion, in fact. These assignments also offer space for students to disclose, if they wish, anxieties or concerns that might impact their experience in my course – things they may not have shared otherwise.

2. **Writer's Memo:** When students are submitting an assignment that I know was challenging, I will often ask them to include a Writer's Memo, or what some instructors call an "assignment wrapper." In these short, reflective pieces of writing, students respond to one or two questions such as the following:

   - How did the writing/revision process go for you with this assignment?
   - How do you feel about this draft at this moment in time?
   - What are you proudest of in this draft?
   - What might you have done next, if you had more time to work on this assignment?

   These memos establish a private line of communication with each student. What I learn from these pieces of writing helps me tailor my feedback to each writer – and can save me valuable time trying to explain delicately to a student something that they already know (e.g., "I waited too late to begin this assignment and ran out of time. I know I need to rewrite this.") I sometimes notice a concern or question across memos that I address in future classes or via an out-of-class workshop.

3. **Peer-to-peer research**: For some of my courses, students conduct original research via peer surveys or interviews focused on a question that has emerged from their course learning. For example, in the English Grammar course, a student might investigate their peers' attitudes toward grammatical correctness in text messages or explore classmates' conceptions of what it means to "sound educated" in their speech. Some of these topics (e.g., "sounding educated") can invite deeper conversations about inclusion/exclusion and belonging – particularly in regard to language difference. An interview that starts with a scholarly question (e.g., "When at college have you experienced insecurity about how you speak/write?") often leads to discussions about race, class, gender, or other aspects of students' social identities.

Preparing for Discomfort

Another key implication from inclusivity research is that students need preparation and support for experiencing discomfort (e.g., Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Shapiro, 2019b). Given that students tend to equate inclusivity with positive affect (as discussed earlier), we must have honest conversations with them about what kinds of discomfort can actually facilitate learning and personal growth. Just as a hiker puts on specialized clothing and shoes in preparation for a strenuous trek, we can help students "gear up" to engage with discomfort as they journey through our courses. One way we can do this is by establishing norms for classroom discussion, as mentioned earlier. These can include "Speak for yourself and not for a group" or "Criticize ideas rather than individuals." Having such norms makes it easier to intervene as needed, such as when a few students are monopolizing the discussion, the class has veered off-topic, or

emotions are running high and students might need a break. We can also warn students about particular topics that may be upsetting or offensive – not as a reason for them to disengage, but as an opportunity for them to prepare.

Classroom rituals can also be very helpful in preparing students for discomfort. For the past several years, I have opened each of my class sessions with a brief mindfulness exercise – another practice supported by higher education research (Bamber & Schneider, 2020). Usually, this involves breath work and/or a body scan, but I sometimes incorporate other elements, such as visualization, poetry, or positive self-talk. Students have told me that these exercises help them to settle into class, especially on days when they are stressed or anxious.

Reflective writing is another tool we can incorporate regularly, to give students processing time prior to, during, or after a difficult discussion. One of my favorite in-class freewriting prompts, especially in a class where students seem hesitant to disagree with one another, is: "What's one question or perspective that hasn't yet been brought into the discussion?" This prompt allows students to bring in an idea or position that they may not agree with themselves, but which they would like to consider collectively.

Talking about (In)equity

As noted earlier, research suggests that talking openly about equity is an important aspect of inclusivity. The unlevel playing field of higher education can be particularly prominent when it comes to academic writing (Shor, 1997), as some students may have had fewer opportunities than their classmates to develop as academic readers and writers. We should talk openly with students, both individually and as a group, about challenges they might be facing with academic and/or social adjustment. Simple questions such as "What do you wish you had known prior to coming to this school?" or "What are you learning about yourself this term?" can open up conversations (orally or in writing) that provide valuable insight into student experiences. Indeed, research has found that when they talk honestly about struggles with "belonging uncertainty," students actually (perhaps ironically) experience an *increased* sense of connection and belonging (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011). We also need to articulate for students the strategies and resources we are using to help level the playing field, such as making course materials accessible in multiple modalities and formats (Borgman & Dockter, 2018) and taking into account students' labor, growth, and reflection when we grade their work (Inoue, 2015).

Conclusion

I imagine that most writing instructors already employ many of these strategies. Moreover, I have no doubt that what I have discussed here is only the "tip of the iceberg" when it comes to inclusive writing pedagogy. Whether or not readers implement the suggestions above, I hope this article has provided useful insight into what inclusivity looks and feels like from a student perspective. With this insight, we can be more transparent with students – and with ourselves – about the intentions behind our pedagogical actions.

And students do indeed value our efforts at creating inclusive classroom spaces. In (anonymous) end-of-course evaluations, my students often mention specific elements of instruction that contributed to their sense of belonging in the classroom. Many have indicated in particular that they appreciate my focus on building community and on promoting engagement across difference. One wrote, for example, that my first-year writing course provided "excellent practice in working with and understanding the experiences of people with different life experiences. . . [which] forced me, to consider my ideas, ideals, and preconceived notions to a great degree." Another said, similarly, that peer-to-peer interaction "not only helped me to learn more about my classmates but it also allowed me to hear their opinions and their view on language and thus how important it is to always keep an open mind."

For those inspired to deepen their commitment to inclusive pedagogy, I offer the following advice: Start small. Aim for quality of changes, rather than quantity. Most of all, remember that inclusive pedagogy is not simply an add on to what we already do. It is, rather, an opening up of our classrooms and our curricula. Our aim is to facilitate a greater sense of belonging and connection for all of our students.

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