

# Best Practices: Belonging & Inclusion

## Introduction

The Intercultural Credibility Advisory Committee (ICAC) “advises the President in order to cultivate a culture of safety, inclusion, representation, and advocacy for all members of The Seattle School community to thrive across culture and identity.” We know that developing trustworthiness with one another across all areas of difference within this learning community requires ongoing relationship, intentionality, conversation, and practice. As a committee, we recognize that we are not introducing intercultural credibility to a blank slate, but that we are joining work with a history in the institution and helping it to grow.

We have much to learn from one another in this work. A priority of this current committee has been to hold a listening posture within the institution and beyond. Our intent in listening is to form a clearer picture of our learning community’s best practices and areas for learning and growth. As we identify those areas, we steward that information in order to advise and inform areas for further training and equipping for our employees and instructional staff.

For this project, we sought to identify the best instructional practices for cultivating belonging and inclusion. We listened to instructional staff across the institution — instructors of theology and psychology, virtual and onsite, semester-long and intensive, degree and non-degree, and of a variety of class sizes. This report offers our findings on the practices that instructors say work well in our learning community.

We are sharing our findings with you:

- To make visible the good practices that already exist and work well within The Seattle School’s spaces;
- To celebrate the work on belonging and inclusion already occurring in our institution;
- To invite you to further our institution’s work of inclusion! We hope that you find one new practice to incorporate in the pages that follow.

We hope that sharing our learnings encourages you and invites you to participate in the ongoing work of intercultural credibility.

With shared hope and abundant grace,

The 2022-23 Intercultural Credibility Advisory Team

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## Method: Listening & Finding Themes

We gathered data from two sources: (1) a faculty meeting on practices they use to support classroom discourse, and (2) a survey that we sent to all instructors in degree programs and the two Centers.

- (1) At the Fall 2022 Instructional Team Orientation, the team engaged small group discussion on classroom practices regarding our community's [Statement on Discourse](#) (see notes, end of document). They compiled their best practices in a shared document, which was shared with the ICAC.
- (2) We invited all instructors from every realm of the institution to share their practices. We asked them, "What is one practice you do in your instructional setting that helps students/participants to feel a sense of connection to, belonging with, and understanding of one another? Tell us about the practice, and when and how you use it in the classroom/small group." We then invited stories about the time that practice worked well.

The practices from both sources were compiled and thematized to identify common practices that support classroom belonging and inclusion. Those are described in the next section, followed by stories of these practices from within our institution.

Note that throughout the report, we use the term "instructors" to encompass the responses from diverse roles including degree and non-degree faculty, facilitators, listening lab leaders, assistant instructors, etc. Depending on their role, respondents sometimes used terms students, learners, or participants — the recipients of instructional space care.

## Practices that Support Belonging & Inclusion

Instructors already use a number of practices to support inclusion and belonging to encourage discourse. Though specific practices vary, the below themes were mentioned by multiple instructors. Each is discussed in more detail in the pages that follow.

- 1. Be intentional about introductions.**
- 2. Set expectations that learning is a transformative, relational process.**
- 3. Agree on class norms and return to those agreements when needed.**
- 4. Create a consistent start-of-class gathering practice.**
- 5. Teach and employ tools for self-awareness and -regulation.**
- 6. Make the social location of the content explicit.**

### A Note on Small Groups

Small groups were mentioned often - in nearly half of the responses. However, we did not include it as its own theme or tool because many instructors work exclusively in small groups. For those who work with larger groups, note that small groups were often mentioned as a tool that can be utilized in large classes/presentations, whether onsite table discussions or online breakout rooms. Groups may have consistent members or be randomized. When small groups are mentioned in the below practices, think of them as a tool more than a pre-determined class format.

#### **(1) Be intentional about introductions and sharing.**

About half of all suggested practices were about setting expectations at the start of a class. Some were about the importance of introductions - both of the instructor and inviting student interaction with one another. Some of these may work best in small groups, so everyone is introduced to everyone else, but there is also value in using table conversation or breakout rooms so that each learner knows (and is known by) at least a few people in a large group.

- Instructors introduce themselves with identities (pronouns, sexual orientation, body bias, geography, ethnicity) and encourage students to do the same.
- Pre-gathering discussion board for introductions: name, location, what they are most excited about, what they are most concerned about.
- Complete a Paseo Protocol and, in small groups, ask students to share about the identities and communities that shape them. (Talk to the Center for Transforming Engagement for more information on the protocol.)
- In small groups, have students share 5 things they want others to know about them and 1 fear they feel comfortable sharing.

Similarly, instructors invite deeper sharing over the course of a term or program. This is done through:

- Discussion board posts.
- Small group discussions (consistent groups or randomized).
- Inviting students to share fears or concerns.

**(2) Set expectations that learning is a transformative, relational process.**

Many of the first session practices are simply expectations and information the instructor says to the class. This works in-person and online, for any class size.

- Naming expectations or assumptions that:
  - People will change their minds.
  - That learning community is a pledge of mutual accountability, of listening and sharing.
  - Growing to tolerate discomfort/tension across differences is a learning outcome.
  - Students take responsibility for their own needs to regulate and engage.
  - We will need to pause and redirect — and share some examples of situations in which we will do so.
  - Different cultures have different ways of communicating and norms of politeness, and note that even within the USA, there are many cultures.
- Share a model of group development phases, such as forming, storming, norming, performing, and mourning.

**(3) Agree on class norms and return to those agreements when needed.**

Of the abundance of practices about the first class/session, the majority were about creating norms, learning agreements, or covenants. Instructors do variations of this in large and in small groups, onsite and online. Some suggestions included:

- Invite students to imagine and name situations where we will pause and redirect.
- Invite learners to share how they would like to be engaged by someone who is different (or even “opposite”) from them. Create behavioral norms from this.
- For large groups: have students discuss in small groups and then share out via a google doc, sticky notes on a wall, or verbally. The class covenant may be large; put ones that are repeated from multiple groups at the top.
- Revisit the norms at the beginning of each session.
- Revisit the norms when the class needs to pause and reset a heated conversation, to remember how we commit to being together.
- For online classes, also make zoom norms explicit. Do we use the chat, and how often, or for what purposes? Are we a “camera on” class, and when is it okay to turn it off?

One respondent stated that consistency in classroom norms across faculty and classes would be helpful. Doing so could strengthen shared culture and clear expectations.

#### **(4) Create a consistent start-of-class gathering practice.**

Many instructors maintain consistent practices at the start of each class. Doing so alleviates tension by leaving the outside world “at the door” (or, for online spaces, leaves tensions for a different time). Instructors use a variety of practices, which fall into two categories:

- A spiritual practice, such as a prayer, singing, guided breathing, meditation, or body scan to help students be aware of and release tension.
- A check in: have each student share (all together or in breakout groups) the good/bad/ugly, the happy/crappy, or the life giving/death dealing of their week or month (whatever time period since last gathered).

#### **(5) Teach and employ tools for self-awareness and -regulation.**

As mentioned above, some instructors start each class with spiritual practices that connect soul and body. One mentioned meditation practices focused specifically on resilience and self-compassion. You don’t need to be a meditation expert; there are plenty of recordings online that you can use.

Embodied practices were the most commonly named resource for when conversation gets tense or heated. Instructors ask students to pause and pay attention to what they are feeling in their body. This may be just a noticing, or may be the start of an invitation to regulate their nervous systems in order to stay in the conversation with respect and compassion. These learnings can be attached to professional goals, as therapists, pastors, and leaders will undoubtedly have moments of needing to practice systems regulation in their work.

#### **(6) Make the social location of the content explicit.**

An instructor shared that they name the context from which teaching material is derived and acknowledge that its impact or application may apply or affect people differently based on their identities and context. For example, much of the conversation on vulnerability is by and about white women, and may not reflect the realities of a person of culture.

Another practice is to alternate discussion formats to honor different personality preferences and cultural norms. Formats include mutual invitation, turn and talk, write-then-share, share in the chat, journaling just for you, small groups and share out. (For more information on any of these, talk with your supervisor.) Make explicit the reason for the variety, including to accommodate different learning styles and personalities..

Finally, another instructor gives historically marginalized or non-majority group learners space for their own conversations.

#### **What We Did *Not* Hear**

Instructors shared 4 practices about what they do when things get heated. 3 were about embodied noticing and regulating; one was referring back to classroom norms. The low responses on this topic and strife of recent years during crises suggest that we may benefit from additional strategies to help transform heated conversations into generative discourse.

## Stories of Success

In this section, we offer stories from instructors in their own words about how practices have shaped their classrooms. We gave staff the option of being identified by name, by role, or complete anonymity.

Discussion and reaction was getting heated in response to a video that was dated and sexist but important in the historical arc of therapy approaches. I asked students to take a moment to register what was happening inside them. And if they could, to imagine this was a client situation. How would they respond?

- Faculty member

Students often remark on various feelings they had as we started, and how their bodies have shifted - or not - throughout the breathing/presence practice. E.g. I felt my body relax as I "put my list outside the door to pick up after class"--or - "I had a lot of trouble letting go of all the other things to be able to be here."

- Jeanette Scott, Listening Lab Leader

In my first year of teaching at the school, I had a student make an off-handed comment about having to watch a video of an Indigenous Maori woman presenting her work on decolonial research methods. I defused a pretty awkward/tense moment by reminding him of our community agreements (including the recognition that conflict/misunderstandings are likely to arise in a classroom).

- Faculty member

One student in their apprenticeship did a great job of modeling [attention to process in addition to content]. The conversation was about discourse and folks shared about sexual orientation and the church . At the end of the invitation the Facilitator was ready to "move on" , but our student was able to name the level of honesty and asked if folks could simply take some time in silence to pay attention to their own processing of the honest disclosure.

- Ron Ruthruff, Core Faculty

We had a small group that had two members who were very far apart on the theological spectrum. One was a female pastor in a progressive denomination, and the other was a male graduate of Liberty University. The required pre-session video about relating across theological differences set them up well as they entered the group, lowering their defensiveness. The small group functioned very well, across this difference, including continuing to meet after the program ended.

- Andrea Sielaff, Center for Transforming Engagement

## Conclusions & Recommendations

As we pursue our shared mission to train people for service of God and neighbor through transforming relationships, we hope that these practices serve you well. Perhaps more vitally, we hope that they serve your students well by modeling and equipping them for the practice of transforming relationships wherever they go.

As a committee, we recognize that we are not introducing intercultural credibility to a blank slate, but that we are joining work with a history in the institution and helping it to grow. That said, our aim is to continue to help it grow. To that end, we include recommendations for next steps:

- We hope that instructional teams gather to discuss the findings here and share more particulars or even additional practices.
- One respondent stated that consistency in classroom norms across faculty and classes would be helpful to strengthen shared culture and clear expectations. Especially in online formats, where the building doesn't hold a routine or entry-boundary for participants, this could be impactful. What are the baseline expectations and practices that are true across a program? Perhaps faculty could agree on norms that will be consistent in every degree course; perhaps Center instructors can do so for their offerings.
- As mentioned above, there were very few responses on responding to heated conversations or classroom crises. This low response may suggest that we need to ask about it particularly. It may also suggest that staff need to be equipped with more strategies to transform heated conversations into transformative discourse. We are curious where we see this done well, or if there are outside resources that could share with us.
- Put best practices into practice in more spaces. If one of the practices in this report is one you haven't yet tried, we hope you try it in an upcoming gathering.
- There have never been more modalities for instruction than in the present era — onsite, online, hybrid; weekly, intensive, module; large group, small group, combination. While some modifications were suggested in this report, future work may need to be done to identify practices for belonging and inclusion that are most conducive to some of those formats and that meet the needs of participants of The Seattle School's programs.

The responses included in this report indicate that belonging and inclusion are high priorities to our instructional staff, and we celebrate that value! We hope that sharing our learnings encourages you and invites you to participate in the ongoing work of intercultural credibility, in your classrooms and in conversations with your colleagues.

If you have feedback, resources, or anything else to share with the Intercultural Credibility Advisory Committee, please email us at [culture@theseattleschool.edu](mailto:culture@theseattleschool.edu), so we can continue to build and offer future resources. We look forward to continue to learning with you.

## Notes & References

Learn more about the work and history of the Intercultural Credibility Advisory Committee on the [intercultural credibility](#) webpage.

*The Seattle School Statement on Discourse:*

*In an abiding belief—based on the witness of Scripture—that all people are image bearers of God, The Seattle School affirms the Belovedness of all people, including differences in ability, race, age, ethnicity, economic status, creed, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The Seattle School chooses an intentional posture of dialogue and engagement, with a desire to be a context that bridges differing traditions, perspectives, and cultures toward the possibility of encountering the generous hospitality for all people found in the reign of God. In a divided and broken world, we seek to train people to be agents of hope and healing for individuals and communities. We are a community seeking to recognize, reflect, and engage the dignity, agency, and mutuality of all people, especially those who have been marginalized.*