

**Teaching Commentary**

# Recommendations for Contextualizing and Facilitating Class Conversations about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Justice

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## Abstract

Conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging (DEIB) and social justice should be incorporated in many courses, but especially undergraduate Agricultural and Applied Economics courses due to their value for students' personal and professional development (e.g., Lambert Snodgrass, Morris, and Acheson 2018; Wiersma-Mosley 2019). However, these conversations present difficulties and challenges that instructors should anticipate and recognize prior to facilitation. To prepare for and maximize these experiences for both students and instructors, we believe instructors should bring PEACE (i.e., *Preparation, Expertise, Authenticity, Caring, and Engagement*; Saucier 2019a, 2019b; Saucier and Jones 2020) to the classroom, a framework for modeling and inspiring empathy among their students, and set the foundation for safe, meaningful conversations. In this article, we discuss practical ways instructors can create empathetic and inclusive learning spaces for themselves and their students that allow for conversations about DEIB and social justice issues. We believe our recommendations will increase the utility and success of these conversations in class, which, in turn, will create a more enriching experience for both students and instructors.

## 1 Introduction

In all courses, including those in Agricultural and Applied Economics, conversations and/or exploration of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) are fundamental to students' personal and professional development. Economics can be understood as universal and applicable to every human being (Bartlett 1996), and as such, DEIB and social justice conversations should not be neglected in these classes. In fact, some have argued economists should treat social well-being with the utmost importance, over materialistic values (Piovani and Togrul 2012). Similarly, Pereira and Costa (2019) advocate for stronger ties between undergraduate economics students, the university, and the community due to the implications these relationships have for students' social responsibility.

Unfortunately, though, women and minorities have often been historically excluded from top introductory economics textbooks (e.g., Feiner and Morgan 1987) and continue to be underrepresented among Agricultural and Applied Economics faculty (McCluskey 2019) and in economics (Bayer and Rouse 2016) and agriculture (Thomas, Cotten, and Luedke 1991) professions more broadly. Zepeda and Marchant (1998) argue that we can diversify agricultural economics faculty by attracting and retaining more women and students from marginalized groups during their undergraduate and graduate education through increasing their access to role models and mentoring. Although some courses are explicitly devoted toward addressing social justice in the Agricultural and Applied Economics discipline (e.g., U.S. Food, Social Equity, and Development; Kolodinsky and Tobin 2021), many are not. Further, given the traditionally competitive orientation of business and economics disciplines (e.g., Kimura, Reeves, and Whitaker 2019), students in such fields may at times put a greater emphasis on competition among their peers, rather than inclusion and cooperation. Importantly, students in introductory

economics courses are often diverse in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status; Bartlett 1996). Plus, diverse economists bring different perspectives regarding economic policy that are consequently important for student learning (Bayer and Rouse 2016). To combat the systemic barriers for underrepresented populations and enhance our students' development, instructors should proactively engage in DEIB conversations within Agricultural and Applied Economics courses.

Given that Agricultural and Applied Economics has been historically led by White men (Charles 2019), it is possible students may not have had conversations about DEIB and social justice in academic settings (or at all), not have truly considered others' perspectives empathetically, or feel defensive. Therefore, more responsibility falls on Agricultural and Applied Economics instructors for embedding DEIB initiatives into their course design and teaching practices. These conversations should aid in students' understanding of others' social experiences, help them recognize inequity around them, and allow them subsequently to choose to be part of the problem or part of the solution for these issues. In this commentary, we discuss practical ways instructors can create empathetic and inclusive learning spaces—for themselves and their students—that allow for conversations about DEIB and social justice issues. While we discuss these recommendations within the context of Agricultural and Applied Economics courses, these recommendations generalize to classes of various sizes, levels, modalities (e.g., face-to-face, online, hybrid), and/or academic disciplines.

## 2 Why These Conversations Are Difficult

There are several reasons why in-class conversations about DEIB and social justice are difficult for both students and instructors. These topics may not only be difficult to fully comprehend (e.g., some may struggle with understanding the differences between “diversity” and “inclusion”; Roberson 2006), but they may also be sensitive or controversial (e.g., discussing contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter; Troka and Adedola 2016). The sharing of differing or even opposing viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences among students may make civil discourse and mutual respect harder to achieve (Shaffer 2019). Further, some students may perceive conversations about DEIB and social justice as personally or professionally irrelevant, especially if students (or instructors) are majority group members. In such situations, students may not feel as if they are allowed to engage in these conversations and may feel threatened or defensive about these topics (Howell et al. 2017). The actual interactions during these conversations may be difficult (e.g., resistance, confrontation, emotional responses; Gayles et al. 2015). Despite these real challenges, literature suggests DEIB initiatives have been considered a growing issue within agricultural education (e.g., Lambert Snodgrass et al. 2018; Wiersma-Mosley 2019), meaning these conversations in our classes are not only important, but necessary.

## 3 Practical Recommendations for Facilitating Conversations about DEIB and Social Justice

### 3.1 Set Norms for Yourself as the Instructor

It is important to note that these DEIB initiatives in the classroom, and subsequent conversations, begin with instructors (McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piqueux 2020), specifically through PEACE, empathy, and trickle-down engagement. “PEACE” is an acronym that describes the persona that instructors may use in their classes: Preparation, Expertise, Authenticity, Caring, and Engagement (Saucier 2019; Saucier and Jones 2020). Though instructors' preparation (Gullason 2009) and expertise (Korte, Lavin, and Davies 2013) are often emphasized in business and economics classes, we argue deliberate displays of authenticity (i.e., instructors' genuine expression of their personality), care (i.e., demonstrating dedication to fostering students' well-being and professional development), and engagement (i.e.,

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in the course) improve the classroom experience for both students and instructors (see Saucier et al. 2022a for more discussion and examples of how to implement PEACE in your class). Similar to PEACE, we also advocate for the infusion of empathy into one's courses.

Empathy refers to one's ability to take the emotional and cognitive perspectives of others (Elliot et al. 2011). We encourage instructors to adopt the empathetic course design perspective as a means to infuse empathy into their classes (see Saucier et al. 2022a for recommendations). Relatedly, inclusive classroom practices (e.g., antihierarchical classroom environments) tend to benefit all students (Hogan and Sathy 2022) and can even motivate social change (Piovani and Togrul 2012). Contrary to the historically competitive nature of business classes (e.g., Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016), empathetic and inclusive course design has helped us build community, rapport, trust, and connections with our students. Practical demonstrations of this include instructors learning students' names (e.g., Alberts, Hazen, and Theobald 2010), explicitly telling and showing students they care about them and their learning (e.g., Bondy et al. 2007), and sharing their own stories about who they are as people with their students (e.g., Rasmussen and Mishna 2008). Students need to relate to and trust their instructors (Cavanagh et al. 2018) because those who do not may be uncomfortable listening to our, or sharing their own perspectives (e.g., Holley and Steiner 2005).

As instructors establish trust and rapport with students, instructors must be mindful of, and acknowledge, their role in leading DEIB initiatives and conversations (e.g., Keith et al. 2007). In our experience, one of the best practices to facilitate student engagement (related to DEIB initiatives and beyond) is through "trickle-down engagement" (TDE; Saucier 2019b; Saucier et al. 2022b). That is, instructors' engagement in their own courses initiates students' engagement and subsequent learning. In other words, instructors' mindfulness, tone, approach, and empathy in DEIB conversations will likely be modeled by students as well. Ultimately, by establishing PEACE, demonstrating empathy and inclusivity, and modeling engagement, the relationships between you and your students as well as among students will benefit. These relationships are the foundation for positively and productively engaging in conversations about DEIB and social justice and should be established prior to said conversations.

### 3.2 Define and Clarify DEIB Concepts

To effectively engage in DEIB initiatives and conversations with your students, you should clearly define its components. This is perhaps especially true in Agricultural and Applied Economics courses, given the historic underrepresentation of minority group identities within this field (Feiner and Morgan 1987; Bayer and Rouse 2016; McCluskey 2019). That is, students with majority-group identities may have a different understanding of these terms than students with minority-group identities, and clear definitions of the following terms should be provided by the instructor. Simply, "diversity" refers to human differences (e.g., Van Ewijk 2011), "equity" refers to fairness (Zollers, Albert, and Cochran-Smith 2000), and "inclusion" and "social justice" further the idea that everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or any other identity, deserves to belong and be supported (Torres-Harding et al. 2014). Clarify that these terms and concepts like "diversity," "equity," "inclusion," and "social justice" refer to *everyone*. This may be a revelation for some students, especially those with majority-group identities.

### 3.3 Demonstrate the Value of DEIB in Your Class

The first DEIB-related norm you should convey to your students is that you value DEIB. You can do this before the semester even starts with DEIB-specific syllabus statements (see Hogan and Sathy 2022 for examples). Once the semester starts, you can promote critical thinking about social justice by analyzing race and gender in in-class activities or examples (see Bartlett 1996 for specific examples in both

macroeconomics and microeconomics courses). Another option to promote representation within your Agricultural and Applied Economics classes is to incorporate the work of diverse scholars, which can increase students' sense of belonging within the field broadly (Schinske et al. 2016) and within your class specifically. In accord with Schinske et al. (2016), we recommend consulting the Scientist Spotlights Initiative (<https://scientistspotlights.org/>) to identify pioneers within the fields of agriculture and economics. As Goering et al. (2022) suggest, Scientist Spotlights can be either student-created (e.g., students identify such scholars) or instructor-created (e.g., instructors provide media resources, like podcasts or TED talks, by these scholars for students to reflect on). These types of activities and reflections provide students with opportunities to better understand various social identities within the context of their discipline and will help prepare them for in-class conversations about these topics.

### 3.4 Set DEIB Conversation Norms

Again, consistent with TDE (Saucier 2019b; Saucier et al. 2022b), instructors should model behaviors they expect to see in their students, like active listening and respect for others' perspectives and experiences (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Further, they can set "rules" for their students about how to engage in these conversations (see Howe and Abedin 2013 for recommendations). In our classes, one rule that we state (both verbally and written in our syllabi as a course policy) is that, "No one, including us, may intentionally offend another member of the class." If someone is offended, then we should default to thinking the offense was unintentional. Another rule is that if someone is offended, they address their offense to us as instructors, rather than directly confronting another student, for example. In our experience, this rule allows us to mediate the conversation between students while allowing them to express their feelings, acknowledge each other's perspectives, and retract or rephrase their statements.

We also recommend instructors use "trigger warnings" (i.e., signals to inform students of content that may lead to harmful experiences; Lockhart 2016) to cognitively and emotionally prepare students for the upcoming conversation. We acknowledge that some argue against the use of trigger warnings because they may prevent students from developing effective coping strategies and/or increase their levels of anxiety related to distressing content (e.g., Lukianhoff and Haidt 2018). However, others argue there are benefits to using trigger warnings in class (e.g., creating more inclusive learning environments for students with trauma; see Lockhart 2016), and we recommend them based on our experiences.

### 3.5 Empower Students' Voices

Many scholars believe students' voices can be a catalyst for inclusive, social change (e.g., Housee 2012; Messiou 2019). In the classroom, this often starts with students sharing their experiences and perspectives, which can happen during reflections or journal assignments that can serve as the foundation for class conversations (see Hackman 2005 for the importance of personal reflection). It is important to note, though, that instructors should not require students to share experiences they are not willing to share, nor should they use any single student's experience to generalize to a larger demographic group (i.e., tokenization; Wingfield and Wingfield 2014). Providing students with the opportunity to use their voices to share and discuss their experiences is a powerful way to help the entire class connect personally with each other, and to the conversation topics.

To continue to hear students' voices, it is important to *validate* students' contributions, especially within the context of having difficult, DEIB conversations. Sharing personal experiences related to DEIB issues is an inherently vulnerable experience for students, and instructors should be intentional in their responses to students' comments and questions. One of the easiest ways to do this is for instructors to verbally thank students for sharing their experiences with the class. Instructors should also demonstrate (and model) active listening skills during DEIB conversations, for example, by paraphrasing students' responses and reflecting students' feelings (see Bodie et al. 2015). Beyond verbal behaviors, instructors



should reinforce their active listening through nonverbal behaviors like nodding, maintaining eye contact with students, and physically positioning themselves toward students who are responding in class (Bodie et al. 2015). These verbal and nonverbal behaviors help validate students' contributions, in our experience.

### 3.6 Focus on Conversation, not Accusation

Conversations about DEIB and social justice have the potential to be contentious. Importantly, we recommend instructors anticipate and proactively frame these dialogues as conversations rather than debates. In our experience, debates can involve opinions that have similar levels of veracity and possibilities for truth. Debates also often have winners and losers, which is likely not a productive classroom method (Piovani and Togrul 2012). The goal in conversations about DEIB and social justice is not to win, not to identify right and wrong sides, nor to assign blame. Contributions can be acknowledged, and respect can be given, even when parties disagree.

It is possible, if not likely, that at some point in DEIB conversations, students will use incorrect language unknowingly. Rather than assigning blame when students make comments that are inconsistent with the concepts of DEIB and social justice, we encourage instructors to treat these as teachable moments whenever possible to affirm these concepts. In such situations, we tend to use language as follows, "Instead of using that term, the term [insert more appropriate term] better reflects [insert the concept the student was referring to]," which tends to be well-received by students in our experience. It is important for instructors to realize that confrontation comes with cost—calling students out for prejudiced comments may alienate or anger the students, but it is sometimes necessary. For instance, if following up an inappropriate comment with a subtle suggestion to rephrase their comment is unsuccessful, it may be necessary to label the comment clearly and directly as inappropriate (e.g., "That comment may be perceived as offensive to some, and I'm going to ask that you use different language going forward."). Fortunately, we have not experienced the latter situation often, perhaps because of the classroom and conversation norms we intentionally create. Further, instructors should understand that their silence in response to an offensive statement may imply tacit agreement. Overall, in our experience, when students engage with the topics with thought and empathy, and are not intentionally offending others, conversations will be more productive.

## 4 Caveats

Conversations about DEIB and social justice are valuable, and processing these topics takes time, effort, energy, and emotion (see Griffin and Ouellett 2007). While our recommendations may increase the chances of successful conversation, these recommendations lower, but do not eliminate, the chances that these conversations may appear to go poorly. Discomfort, awkwardness, and even conflict are inevitable to some degree in these conversations, and instructors should also understand that they or their students may make mistakes during these conversations. It is important that, in the context of community and rapport that provided the foundation for their conversations, instructors and students own and learn from their mistakes. Again, we should try to decolonize the curriculum (Charles 2019), which starts with instructors' reflection (e.g., about their own identities, about their discipline) and willingness to guide students through these conversations (McNair et al. 2020).

## 5 Conclusion

We acknowledge class conversations about DEIB and social justice may be difficult, particularly in Agricultural and Applied Economics classes. However, the challenges these conversations present can and should be anticipated. We advocate for having these conversations because they are worthwhile for students' personal and professional development. Beyond reframing undergraduate (agricultural) economics courses to recruit more women and minority students (see Bayer and Rouse 2016 for specific

tips), we must facilitate conversations about these topics mindfully and empathetically to promote social responsibility and change. To do this, instructors should bring PEACE to these conversations, inspire empathy among their students, and model the norms of engagement to ultimately set the context for safer and more meaningful conversations. We emphasize how easy it is to implement these changes and the value of starting small, like Goering et al. (2022) recommends. And as research consistently demonstrates, these inclusive changes tend to benefit *all* students, not just students from underrepresented groups (Hogan and Sathy 2022). These overarching perspectives and our practical recommendations will increase the success and value of these conversations for both instructors and students.

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