



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Creating Socially, Emotionally, and Culturally Responsive Environments to Improve Conditions for Learning

Colleges and universities are becoming more diverse, making the need to be inclusive and socially skilled increasingly important. When it comes to communication, respect and professionalism are key to being productive and heard. Of course, there will be disagreements, dislikes, and differences. We can count on personal experiences and cultural influences to be a factor in how information is presented, processed, and perceived. As instructors and leaders on our campuses, there are ways to create a culture inside and outside of our classrooms that models acceptable behaviors conducive to learning, while also building key skills that students' future employers, clients, or customers desire. No matter where students are on campus—in the classroom, the library, dining hall, clinical setting, or the financial aid office—there are numerous opportunities for learning, enhancing, and developing effective social, emotional, and intercultural skills.

### Social and Emotional Skills

*"We know from the latest learning science that success comes from a combination of academic knowledge and the ability to work with others."* – Walter Isaacson

According to the American Psychological Association, being socially skilled involves having the experience and education needed to be aware of the social concerns of others. There are several components to developing social and emotional skills: self-awareness, situational-awareness, behavioral self-control, and effective communication. Possessing effective social skills means that we are not only aware of our own emotions; we are also aware of the emotions of others so we can use that information to manage ourselves and our interactions.

### Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is a teaching approach used to help address achievement gaps. It involves acknowledging, respecting, and understanding classroom diversity by using what we know about students' experiences and backgrounds, and embedding that information into lessons and interactions. Race is one component of a person's culture. However, it does not tell the whole story about an individual. Culture embodies everything about a person, including language, dialect, clothing, hair, expectations, communication style, customs, beliefs, values, spirituality,

health and wellness, family structures, eye contact, names, and more (Hammond, 2015). Using a cultural approach to teaching allows students to appreciate the relevance of discipline-specific content and how it connects to their lives, communities, and careers. This approach provides educators with the opportunity to assess potential misconceptions or strengths students bring to the content based on their experiences and prior knowledge.

### D.E.E.P. Communication Strategies

To optimize conditions for learning in my courses, I've designed a form of communication, as shown in **Figure 1**, that I not only expect of my students, but consistently enforce throughout each semester. I use D.E.E.P. communication strategies to support and structure in-class discourse, meetings with students, and even to model what an appropriate email looks like. Using this approach in class, I share my expectations with my students that they maintain a socially and emotionally skilled environment that respects diversity and inclusive practices that optimize conditions for learning. According to the report, "Is College Worth It?" by Pew Research Center's *Social and Demographic Trends*, Americans value college education and work ethic, but they tend to value good character even more. I created D.E.E.P. communication because it is important to supplement academic content and discipline-specific theories with social, emotional, and intercultural skills that will benefit students no matter where they are geographically or what career field they choose.

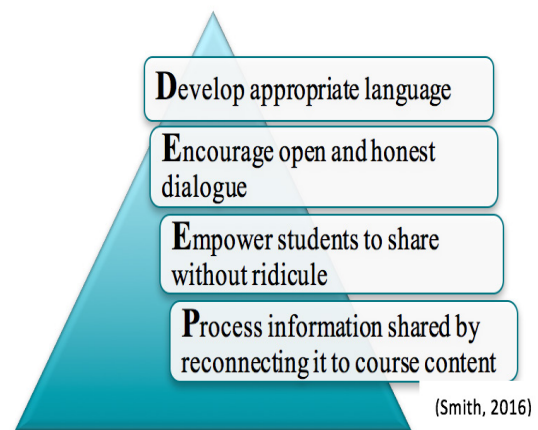


Figure 1: D.E.E.P. Acronym

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## Implementing D.E.E.P

### *Developing appropriate language*

The purpose of developing appropriate language is to establish respect between my students and myself. Students are expected to monitor and evaluate their communication skills. While I appreciate that there are a variety of communication styles, it is important to also keep in mind that conflict-resolution styles can be equally as diverse. I have learned that it is important to say more than “be respectful” to my students. A more successful approach is to define and consistently model what respect looks and sounds like. I identify offensive language and unacceptable words, as well as negative results and outcomes. It’s easy to forget how personal communication styles (i.e. sarcasm) might create conflict or confusion. Stress the importance of collaboration and listening in an inclusive classroom and clarify what inclusive or inclusion means.

Instead of acknowledging someone by pointing at them or using labels (i.e. *that man* with the blue shirt over there, *the girl* who said...), students are instructed to refer to each other by name. To learn names, students are required to create and display name tents with their name on both sides of the tent. The easiest and hassle-free way to do this is to instruct students to use their own paper, making forgetting or losing name tents a fast and simple fix. After I’ve learned their names, students are instructed to turn their name tents towards the students around them so they can properly address each other by name. Students are instructed that respectful language and mature and professional disagreements are communication expectations that are valued. This proper form of communication may take practice; so I’m always prepared to give reminders about appropriate language. I monitor my own language and if I make a mistake, I model appropriate ways to acknowledge awareness and correct the mistake.

Ask students what they find offensive. There’s no way to know students’ values unless they are asked directly. In my class, students anonymously share language they find offensive or inappropriate. Sample student responses include “that’s stupid,” verbal attacks on personal values and beliefs, unprofessionalism, using someone’s skin color as a descriptor, stereotypes about autism, stereotypes about homosexuality, and referring to someone by using slurs and derogatory terms. The benefits of developing appropriate language are enhanced social and emotional skills, respect for diversity and inclusion, and listening and conflict resolution skills.

### *Encourage open and honest dialogue*

The purpose of encouraging open and honest dialogue is to create a trusting environment. Good rapport helps build a community where we learn more about others’ values, cultures, and diverse perspectives. Establishing an environment of trust and respect allows more student voices to be heard and more experiences, thoughts, and opinions to be expressed. Candid communication enables

me to more readily identify and address misconceptions and misunderstandings that students may have.

When topics are sensitive or students are too shy to communicate in a large class or group setting, I distribute index cards to solicit anonymous input and feedback from all students. I collect and shuffle the index cards, then share with the class what they have communicated. Another strategy is to allow students to be anonymous by using the web-based tool [sli.do](https://sli.do) for real-time audience interaction.

### *Empower students to share without ridicule*

The purpose of empowering students to share is to encourage more curiosity and the desire to ask more questions. The classroom is rich with diversity and opportunities to learn the course content in unique and novel ways. Students are encouraged to be skeptics and seek support for claims presented in class, but ridicule is unacceptable. To avoid making assumptions about what students know or should know, I explain what I mean by ridicule, which I define as dismissive or disparaging remarks. Students are informed that I will immediately intervene when there are violations to this expectation. While introducing D.E.E.P. communication to students, I tell them that I will interrupt disparaging remarks. Some students need practice with avoiding the use of dismissive or disparaging remarks and are provided with the opportunity to come up with more professional ways to respond. These students need to see and experience more modeling on how to communicate more respectfully and acknowledge differences and divergent viewpoints. The benefits of intervening when these issues come up include better classroom management, reduced potential negative feelings from students that a response or question might be considered dumb, and increased class participation.

### *Process information shared by reconnecting it to course content*

The purpose of connecting information shared to course content is to ensure discussions are meaningful, productive, and relevant. On occasion, students will share—and get into the weeds—their stories or even make incorrect associations with course content. Sometimes these occasions can be learning opportunities—opportunities to expand discussions, learn what’s important to students, and dispel misconceptions. On the other hand, these occasions can be instances when short attention spans or other factors cause students to check out of the discussion. When discussions veer off-track, interrupting the conversations has worked for me. When I interrupt, I do so with care and consideration as I express appreciation for the contribution and attempt to validate students’ experiences.

## Conclusion

The D.E.E.P. approach has become an integral part of my teaching philosophy. Before I developed this basic approach to communicating in my class, there were occasions when some students were surprisingly rude or offensive. In some cases, students who made rude

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statements only considered what they wanted to say without giving much thought to how their words or actions might impact others. Instead of being reactive to uncomfortable or shocking scenarios, D.E.E.P. communication allows me to be proactive. I establish an environment of respect and inclusion by introducing my D.E.E.P. communication expectations on the first day of class. I inform my students that it will be consistently enforced and revisited throughout the semester.

Depending on the topic, it's not too difficult to explore and use students' interests, values, beliefs, experiences, and community concerns to guide the lessons and make the course content more meaningful. When planning lessons, I do so with student diversity and interests in mind. Collaborating with colleagues and research librarians has been helpful in generating new and different ideas.

Collaboration and communication skills are universal on a college campus, and effective social and emotional skills are in-demand beyond the confines of campus. Through student feedback and my own informal observations of the D.E.E.P. approach to communication in the classroom, I have seen increased mindfulness, cultural awareness, and a willingness to listen to others. I have also seen a reduction in disrespectful outbursts and disparaging remarks. Students are made aware of my commitment to respecting diversity and being inclusive. As an educator, modeling is one of the best ways to demonstrate the message that I am not doing something *to* my students, but I am engaging in acceptable practices *with* my students to enhance their social, emotional, and intercultural skills.

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