A Tool to Advance Inclusive Teaching Efforts: The “Who’s in Class?” Form

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INTRODUCTION

Having a sense of belonging is critical for students’ academic success and well-being (1–4). Creating an inclusive learning environment is also an important aspect of effective teaching (5, 6). However, limited systematic tools are available to help instructors better understand the makeup of their classes to design inclusive experiences (7). We describe the administration of and findings from implementing the “Who’s in Class?” form, a versatile tool that can be used in undergraduate courses of diverse formats and disciplines. The form, codeveloped with input from students, instructors, and administrative staff, helped instructors learn more about their students at the beginning of their courses to better foster inclusivity early, create plans for inclusion, and implement inclusive teaching practices. This study, approved by the Institutional Review Board, describes the administration of the tool during the Spring 2020 abrupt switch to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Fall 2020 semester. The guiding questions were

- What changes do instructors make in their teaching when they become more aware of student diversity through the form?
- What are students’ perceptions of their instructors’ usage of the form?
- What are instructors’ perceptions of their usage of the form?

PROCEDURE

Ten instructors from two private liberal arts institutions and their students participated in this study representing 20 total courses that were lecture-based, discussion-based, a combination of both, or lecture/laboratory courses. Several instructors used the form in more than one course. See Table 1 for additional course information. Sample questions from the 31-item “Who’s in Class?” form are included in Table 2 and the full form is available in the supplemental material (Appendix S1). Items asked for mostly quick (yes/no) responses. There were also a few open-ended questions to give students the opportunity to share their social identities and other attributes. Many of the questions focus on informing instructors about the diversity of their class in areas of noted challenge with regard to equity and inclusion. A major goal was to help instructors use this information to take small steps to support the success of all learners. Instructors administered the form typically the first or second day of each class by giving students the survey link provided by the center for teaching and learning. Instructors were encouraged to dedicate time at the beginning of class to administer the survey to support higher responses rates. Completion of the form took on average 9 min, was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. Instructors also viewed data in aggregate to protect learner identity.

Instructors next met with the center for teaching and learning staff and developed an action plan based on student responses for making their courses more inclusive during the semester and completed an instructor planning form (Appendix S2 in the supplemental material). If instructors planned to implement different inclusive teaching strategies for each course, they submitted separate planning forms for each one. There were five instances of this occurring, generally when other courses were not multisection courses of the same type. Instructors were encouraged to make changes that aligned with their teaching philosophies and fostered an environment of inclusion. Classroom climate (37%) and teaching approaches (35%) were the categories most focused upon in instructors’ modifications (Table 3). All instructors were asked to let their students know how they planned to use the information to foster a more inclusive classroom. Instructors tried new strategies in their courses to foster inclusion. Examples included meeting informally with students one-on-one as well as weekly with groups, incorporating more flexibility in assignment deadlines, providing alternative virtual spaces for students to ask questions, and creating classroom guidelines for discussions.

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Instructors were also encouraged to maintain a journal of their own preference (e.g., digital notes, physical notebook) so that they could individually reflect upon their efforts during the semester. At the end of the semester, instructors administered an anonymous student feedback form in their courses to gather learners’ perceptions on the tool. A total of 416 students completed the “Who’s in Class?” form. A total of 290 completed the student feedback form at the end of the semester. Instructors received a report of student responses after submitting final course grades and completing the instructor form. Descriptive statistics were conducted to analyze student and instructor feedback on the form. Additional procedural information can be found in Appendix S4 in the supplemental material. Both participating instructors and their students gave their consent to participate in the study by completing separate informed consent forms.

SAFETY ISSUES

There are no known biosafety concerns given that this tool involves students completing an online survey.

CONCLUSION

The majority of students appreciated their instructor using the tool (Fig. 1), and instructors who implemented the tool reported its value (Fig. 2). Few instructors (n = 2) expressed that the number of students completing the form was too low to prompt modifications or that the form did not provide information they could use. Below are representative comments from students about the form:

In comparison to other courses where we did not do this survey, Professor [X] seemed more aware of different identities and student experiences that could impact people's online learning ability this semester. I went into the semester feeling heard and felt more comfortable going into office hours/asking questions knowing that my feelings and preconceived notions about myself as a [department name] student were already out there. This allowed the instructor to know me more personally than numerically.

Below are sample instructor comments on the inclusive teaching strategies they implemented and benefits of the form:

I met with every student 1-on-1 during the first 2 weeks of class, and met with lab groups of 4 every week. I also

### TABLE 1
Course characteristics (no. of courses = 20, no. of students participating in study = 416, participation rate = 96%)

| Characteristic                           | No. |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| STEM                                     | 8   |
| Humanities                               | 2   |
| Graduate level                           | 2   |
| Undergraduate level                      | 18  |
| In-person then transitioned to remote    | 4   |
| Online (synchronous)                    | 13  |
| Online (asynchronous)                   | 2   |
| Hybrid flexible                          | 1   |
| Largest course (no. of students)         | 49  |
| Smallest course (no. of students)        | 6   |

### TABLE 2
Sample questions from the “Who’s in Class?” form

| Item                                                                 | Question type                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| I work on or off campus. The no. of hours that I work per wk is:    | Yes/no + fill-in-the blank           |
| I have a laptop or desktop computer that I can use for class work. | Yes/no                               |
| I am financially capable of purchasing all of the materials needed  | Yes/no                               |
| I am a first-generation student, i.e. neither of my parents        | Yes/no                               |
| My expectations for inclusivity (an equitable, welcoming environment)| Open-ended                           |
actively encouraged 1-on-1 meetings even if they were outside of office hours. For students that lived in different time zones that varied significantly from the scheduled class times, I delivered personalized lecture and lab instruction. I also provided a STEM identity resource presentation based on results from the form. I used many of Tanner’s 21 strategies. I had a 0% DFW rate and have had several students email me about how they enjoyed the semester and felt welcomed.

There was some information that was particularly useful early on and through the semester, relating to one student with a non-verbal learning disability and providing them an opportunity to share this. I worked with this student throughout the semester, and did things like providing a very specific “plan of action” for each week’s work in the class.

An unanticipated result demonstrated the power of administering the form. One instructor expressed not finding utility in the tool, yet their students reported strongly agreeing on its value. Such a case highlights that even if the instructor does not perceive impact, there may be beneficial effects on their students, potentially because the students perceive that the instructor genuinely cares to learn more about them, an important aspect of building an inclusive classroom (5).

Some limitations of using the tool are the potential for some student responses to be identifiable in the case of small class sizes, and challenges with interpreting the information received if there are low response rates. Anonymity is best preserved when the tool is implemented in class sizes that are not very small. For example, responses can be more identifiable in a course size of five students, and learners may feel less comfortable completing the form as a result even though it is anonymous and the results are displayed in aggregate. Decisions to implement the tool in smaller-sized classes should be made carefully, and in such cases reinforcing that completion of the tool is anonymous is important.

### TABLE 3  
Instructor inclusive teaching plans: areas of modification (no. instructors = 10, no. courses = 20)$^a$

| Focus area                                | %   | Sample plans                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Course content (e.g., diversifying syllabus, adapting assignments or course policies, etc.) | 26  | “My syllabus has diverse content in regards to race, ethnicity, and gender in STEM, but I will use the form to incorporate voices that may not be represented based on what’s shared, including invisible aspects of student identity (e.g. country of origin, working 30+ hours per wk, and having dependents)” |
| Classroom climate (e.g., fostering positive student-teacher or student-student relationships, student belonging, classroom community, etc.) | 37  | “To build positive student-student relationships, I will incorporate icebreaker activities at the beginning of problem-based learning assignment breakout sessions to help the students get to know one another. Furthermore, I will encourage students to share what they’ve learned outside of our class to help them understand that I value what they contribute to the classroom learning community.” |
| Teaching approaches (e.g., integrating group work, active learning, utilizing strategies for more equitable student participation, etc.) | 35  | “One day a wk there is a “seminar” style discussion in which I assess participation. Thus far, the class has broken into small groups before moving into a single large group to discuss. The participation is much lower when we move to the large group so I am going to move away from this model and ensure I spend time with each group individually to assess all students’ participation.” |
| Other (please indicate):                   | 2   | “The student responses were about as expected, so I don’t plan on making any modifications based on this form.”                               |
| Total                                      | 100%|                                                                                                                                             |

$^a$The percentage was calculated by taking the total number of the category selected for all instructors, divided by the sum total across categories for all instructors.
form is voluntary will be important. Viewing the information in aggregate as the form was designed can help mitigate identification concerns. Even in the event of lower response rates with in-class administration, the tool still has the potential to help instructors build more inclusive classrooms by capturing some aspects of diversity and student perspectives. Students may also be re-invited to complete the survey at a later date during the course.

Given diversifying student populations, challenges with the abrupt switch to the move to remote learning, and the general need for tools to advance inclusive learning, the “Who’s in Class?” form supported inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic and can be used beyond the crisis.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material is available online only.

SUPPLEMENTAL FILE 1, PDF file, 0.2 MB.

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An opinion article based on the early stages of this work was published in *Inside Higher Ed* (8).

Please note that the “Who’s in Class?” form described in this article is published in the book *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (5) and is also included in the supplemental materials with the publisher’s permission.

We declare no conflicts of interest.

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