



Teaching from an Asset-Based Mindset

Ensuring equity for the students in our courses requires us to view student differences as assets, not deficits. Asset-based teaching views such differences in culture, language, ability, socioeconomic status, gender identity, immigration status, and others as valuable additions to the learning community (Paris & Alim, 2017). This mindset allows us to focus on the strengths of our students rather than any perceived deficits (Renkly & Bertolini, 2018). By focusing on strengths, abilities, and possibilities we allow for an equitable environment that enriches the learning experience for all students.

When we take into account the impact that implicit bias, the biases we aren't consciously aware of, has on our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, it becomes even more apparent that to create equitable learning opportunities we must develop our asset-based mindset (NYU Steinhardt, 2020). We otherwise risk stifling student potential through perceived negative biases that may have no bearing in reality.

Shifting From a Deficit to an Asset Mindset

We can begin by asking ourselves, "What do my students know? What are they bringing into the classroom?" Although recognizing students' backgrounds and individual circumstances is a great start to creating equitable learning, we must push our own mindsets even further in order to achieve an inclusive teaching approach (Deady, 2020). Inclusive teaching is not about recognizing differences in students, but about embracing those differences as assets and using them to the advantage of both the student and the community.

For instance, an English instructor may notice a football player in their classroom and their own implicit bias will cause them to think, "Great, another athlete who is just going to try to pass with minimal effort." In actuality, the student may be a football player and an avid reader who has published award-winning short stories. The instructor's implicit bias may prevent the instructor from recognizing the assets that the student brings to the class because they are focused on a false assumption of the student's deficits.

Some of your students may be concerned that they have missed out or have fallen behind because of the pandemic. You can switch this internal deficient thinking by asking them what they learned during the pandemic, and what are some things that they have done that they never thought they would do during this time. You can share a few examples from your own experience.

Discovering Student Assets

Teaching from an asset-based mindset comes down to avoiding assumptions and asking questions. You avoid assumptions by discovering the assets that your students bring to your course (Cooper & Hawkins, 2016). Consider assigning your students a survey early in the course that asks them questions about their interests, hobbies, skills, and experiences. This will help you develop a clearer idea of your students and their unique assets.

It may be challenging to phrase questions in a way that allows you to get to know your students without being invasive. Below is an example of an online survey that can be distributed to students at the beginning of the course. You may also create multiple surveys that are presented to students throughout the course and provide different insights each time. You may also invite students to respond to just one or two questions that are most interesting to them. Examples of such questions include:

- Describe your work experience and career aspirations
- What do you think is your greatest talent?
- What languages do you speak?



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- Do you play any sports?
- What is your favorite thing to do?
- Do you sing or play any instruments?
- What are the three favorite cities or countries that you have visited?
- What are your three favorite dishes to cook, bake, grill, or eat?
- What else should I know about you, your skills, and your interests?

Getting to Know Your Students

A survey is not the only way to get to know your students. In online courses, holding open office or student hours on Zoom and encouraging students to drop in or entering the session early and staying late provide opportunities for you to learn more about your students. In face-to-face classes, in-person office or student hours and arriving to the classroom early or staying behind a few minutes both allow the opportunity for casual conversations.

Including Student Assets

Once you have collected background information on your students, you can use this information to enrich the learning experience for everyone in the class. There are a multitude of ways to use the background information you have about students:

- Create student groups for projects or assignments based on similar interests. For instance, group students with developed musical ability together to research the power of performance, and assign students who identify as avid readers to collaborate on the power of the written word (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).
- Create student groups for projects or assignments based on diverse skill sets. For instance, assign groups to debate a topic while bringing together students with different professional and leadership levels. Assign surveys or paragraph submissions at the end of the group assignment to ensure everyone participates (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).
- Adjust assignments or rubrics to embrace unique skills or experiences. For instance, assign students an essay structure and allow them to choose their own personal topic (K. Ruiz-Mesa, personal communication, 7/29/2020).
- Encourage students to use their unique perspectives to approach the course content. For instance, in a course on 20th-century Caribbean literature, the musician may write about the instruments described in the novel while the mother draws a parallel between the parent-child relationships that were depicted and the political atmosphere of the time (K. Ruiz-Mesa, personal communication, 7/29/2020).
- Without stereotyping student strengths and interests, encourage them to make use of their unique insights by asking them to share their thoughts and opinions (T. Nance, personal communication, 12/15/2020).



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