Fields in human science have become increasingly aware of the need to train students in language sensitivity. In our program, Exercise Physiology, students are taught about cultural issues and are assessed in their fieldwork on how well they communicate with international patients and people with disabilities. An important part of the curriculum involves learning which words to use when talking to and about people with mental and physical impairments. Though textbooks tend to support pedagogy that addresses cultural variables in the workplace and in writing, the peer-reviewed sources students must use for their research are not often held to the same standards.

I teach a technical/scientific writing course required of all students majoring in Exercise Physiology. When developing the course, I considered a broad range of journals in the field, including Science, Medicine and Science in Sport and Exercise (MSSE), as well as individual articles written by other faculty members. In looking through the well-known and widely-read journal, Science, I found a particularly disturbing article by Ingrid Wickelgren, “Autistic Brains Out of Synch?,” chronicling the life of Benjamin Garbowit, a 14-year-old struggling with autism. After spending the better part of the first two columns explaining with much pathos the disorder and how it affects Benjamin’s life, the author, a freelance writer and Science correspondent, summarizes the results of the study. Researchers studying connectivity problems in the brains of people with autism used PET scans to show frontal lobe activity at work in two groups: a group of people with autism and a control group. The experiment involved asking the groups to interpret the interactions of two triangles on a computer screen. The triangles danced, chased each other, and moved randomly. The writer explains, “As expected, the autistics did not describe the triangles’ ‘intentions’ as well as the normal subjects did” (Wickelgren, 2005). In this sentence, two of the author’s many mistakes are seen, including the inappropriate use of the term “autistics” and the labeling of the control group as “normal,” thus offensively implying that people with autism are not.

This type of language is unacceptable in everyday speech and should not be tolerated in print. But this article is not alone. Insensitive language use is prevalent in almost every genre, from TV and magazine advertisements to some of the best journals in the field. An advertisement for the glucose monitoring system Accu-Chek Aviva, appearing in a free pharmacy-distributed publication titled Diabetes Health, features Chris Dudley, former center for the Portland Trailblazers. Not only is Dudley pictured sitting on the floor with the basketball instead of dribbling, shooting, or passing, but the copy also reads:

I am dedicated.
I am determined.
I am disciplined.
I am a diabetic.  (Roche Diagnostics, 2005)
Although the discrepancy between image and text is among the easiest problems to correct, it is not the only example of insensitive representation, nor is it the most glaringly inappropriate. My students read these items and trust that all of the information is as accurately presented as the science discussed in their research materials.

With so many insensitive representations in the media, how can we expect students to learn acceptable language use? Yet many journals that frequently publish studies involving human subjects have not adopted a policy for sensitive language use. *MSSE* (2011), for example, does suggest that authors use nonsexist language and demonstrate sensitivity in “the semantic description of persons with chronic diseases and disabilities” in its “Information for Authors.” Ironically, the journal *Science* spends more time defining its animal experimentation policy. There are few rules or standards set by the editors of these publications for the discussion of human subjects and, when given, they are often hard to find.

How can we expect students to write without being offensive when some of the best models of published writing do not insist on a consistent set of standards? Is it possible to reference articles that deal with these issues when, to most scientific researchers, “sensitivity” has more to do with chemical interactions than with being polite?

I insist that students use language that is both politically and grammatically correct even if their sources are not. Often, my class is the first time students have had to consider issues of sensitivity. Since the School of Medicine, where our department is located, requires all students to do Community Service, most of them have already had opportunities to work with people who have disabilities, diseases such as diabetes, or other physical or mental impairments, but they have not yet had the sensitivity training included in professional programs such as Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech Therapy, Nursing, or Medicine (Martin, 1999; La Forge, 1991; Weissman, 2006). More importantly, research has demonstrated that when clinicians, educators, and students are aware of the reality of the circumstances and begin to develop empathy, insensitivity becomes less of a problem (Donaldson, 1980; La Forge, 1991; Wells, 2009). Differentiating the person from the disability or illness is a central part of the positive change in attitude and subsequent use of appropriate language.

I have therefore incorporated a discussion of these issues into my syllabus. In the first week of the semester, I hand out the above-noted article on autism for the students to read. I then have them get into small groups to analyze its content, asking them not to focus on sentence structure or layout. After a few minutes, the students report back to the class. A directed discussion then leads to identifying the most problematic paragraph and interpreting its meaning. Sharing their experiences not only helps them open up and become comfortable with class discussion, it also sets the tone for the rest of the semester. Students talk about everything from their personal experiences with illness to working at summer camps for kids with diabetes.

Throughout the remainder of the semester, I ask students to bring in copies of items exemplifying similar language use. For extra credit, they can write a short paper in any format: a letter to the editor, a journal entry, or a more technical essay discussing what they have found and their analysis of the situation. Either the students or I read the source to the class. We then take time to discuss the chosen topic or other experiences they have had since we first began talking about sensitivity. This approach helps keep the issue on their minds and in their writing. Students bring in the journal articles they are using as sources for their papers, websites, and newspaper articles. I also leave the assignment open to non-scientific texts to allow a little more freedom.

Student essays feature gender issues, traditional family stereotypes, and health professions topics. They often draw on personal experience and use supporting material from other classes. Students add information about slogans and tag lines learned from general education courses or use vocabulary from a popular women’s studies course. I also receive papers debating whether political correctness has gone too far.
In addition to the extra credit assignment and class discussions, I have incorporated the sensitivity debate into other areas of the course. I often make it the topic of a five-minute freewriting assignment given at the beginning or end of class. Further, I have added quiz questions as a reminder, and have included the topic in an Annotated Bibliography assignment. The results have been significant.

Other programs have adopted discussions of political correctness into their curricula with mixed results. Marlia E. Banning (2004) as well as Derek R. Avery and David S. Steingard (2008), for instance, address the impact that teaching political correctness has had on their class discussion. They also conclude that the discourse of political correctness is powerful but not without limits. In her “Communications and Popular Culture” class, Banning stresses the importance of including a wide variety of texts into the course material allowing students to find common ground with an issue of personal interest (2004). She also suggests emphasizing listening in the classroom—having students read their work out loud rather than organizing debates where only the loudest voices are heard. From the fields of Business, Psychology and Management, Avery and Steingard (2008) offer a similar solution to avoid self-censorship in the classroom. They assert the importance of having all types of students express opinions on this challenging subject to avoid silence and conclusiveness, recognizing the importance of students reaching their own conclusions. As such examples suggest, instruction that promotes and allows diversity can be rewarding for both students and teachers in a wide variety of disciplines, but care must be taken not to alienate pupils before the real work of learning can begin.

The field of education is, not surprisingly, at the forefront of disability awareness. Like health professions educators, students in general education programs will be teaching individuals from diverse populations when they enter the field. Inclusive classrooms are becoming increasingly common, and it is the job of the educator to recognize individuals with disabilities as part of the classroom. Wells (2009), for example, provides activities and recommendations that show how increased knowledge can decrease student anxiety and improve teacher attitudes. Activities like the internet scavenger hunt and the accessibility project she describes provide learners with a sense of agency as they gain appropriate experience.

The powerful discourse of sensitivity and political correctness should be one of the tools students use in the writing process across the curriculum. While I do not expect that their work will change prevailing practice in all journals, my students leave my class with a heightened awareness of language sensitivity and will be able to bring it into future practice.

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Works Cited


