New Ideas:
Mini Lesson: Higher Education and Brave New Worlds

Read the following fictional case study:

Ali Karakus was a bit anxious about his Political Science class on Wednesday. The syllabus indicated that the class would be discussing the United States’ approach to global terrorism, and even before he read and took notes on chapter 7 in the textbook, he knew the class would have to discuss Islamic terrorism. He was proud of his family’s Turkish roots and knew that his Muslim beliefs did not value violence against others. But he also knew that it was easy for many people to stereotype others, and while he had never directly experienced bigotry at Cerritos College, he had heard a few muttered comments in high school and remembered his family’s anxiety after 9/11. He debated whether to attend class that day; so far, his attendance record was perfect, and he didn’t want to jeopardize it. And he really loved Poli Sci—he even imagined it might become his major, a part of him aspiring to hold political office one day. But he also didn’t want to be turned into a stereotype, a scapegoat, or the sole representative of millions of people worldwide.

Daisy Gavilán experienced something like this anxiety in her speech class. On Tuesday, a student presented an oral argument about why the U.S. needs to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico and why illegal immigrants are ruining life in southern California. On Thursday, there would be a counter-argument offered and the class would have time to share its ideas. Knowing that her aunt was undocumented made this issue far too personal; she knew it would upset her, and she really didn’t want to deal with that. But she also needed to succeed in the speech class to transfer to UCLA, and she didn’t want to miss out on important class time.

If he knew Daisy and Ali, Adam Valk might sympathize. His English class is set to visit the Museum of Tolerance on Friday after reading Elie Wiesel’s novel, Night, and prior to writing their next essay. Unlike Ali and Daisy, he could hide his German heritage a bit more easily—many just imagined him another blond Anglo in LA, which generally was ok
with him—but as soon as people began talking trash about all the “evil” Germans, he found himself getting defensive. Especially since he knew that for many people, “German” was just another word for “Nazi.” And especially because his grandparents had fled Germany in 1938 to reject the political regime. He knew his grandfather’s stories about protesting Hitler’s rise to power...wasn’t that enough for his essay?

Believe it or not, these student experiences are common at colleges and universities. College or university experience isn’t simply about gathering a pile of knowledge—memorizing enough information to pass on to the next level by repeating it on tests and in essays. Higher education is better thought of not as a product—that pile of knowledge—but as a process of knowing. It introduces us to new ideas that challenge our old, sometimes limited, understandings, and helps us discover new ways of seeing the world.

Just as Ali, Daisy, and Adam want to challenge others’ limited perspectives—their stereotypes—their own perspectives are likely to be challenged, too, broadening their understandings about classmates and their experience of the world.

Of course, in challenging our old perspectives, it can also be a little threatening. We all want others to see things our way; we often don’t want to acknowledge that we have room to grow, too. But opening ourselves up to new ways of thinking and new experiences helps us to become intelligent, well-rounded members of our communities and our cultures.

But this growth isn’t possible if the classroom is a threatening place. Anyone who reasonably feels demeaned, dismissed, or abused will react emotionally by becoming depressed, sorrowful or angry. Those emotions lead to withdrawal or avoidance for most people; after all, who wants to put up with that?

So, the process of knowing requires specific ground rules that allow for two things to happen:

1. Students are able to discuss openly and fully a subject without artificial restrictions in a genuine attempt to reach understanding;
2. Students are able to engage in respectful, courteous, and mature discussions free from personal attack, irresponsible generalization, or offensive language.

With these very broad guidelines, students like Ali, Daisy, and Adam—all of us, really—can begin to explore new ideas that may feel dangerous or difficult, knowing that we do so in a safe environment that will open us up to intellectual and personal growth.