

Acknowledging Competence

Overview of acknowledging competence

Teachers deliberately broaden and label both (1) what counts as competence in a given domain and (2) who is seen as competent in that domain. A “domain” includes academic subject matters and disciplines, but also other areas of learning and practice. To broaden what counts as competence, teachers explicitly name and highlight students’ contributions of specific knowledge, skills, and practices, both individual and collective, that are central to engaging and learning in the domain.

To achieve this core goal of acknowledging competence, teachers attend carefully to who is seen and acknowledged as contributing and who is seen as “struggling” or “not smart.” They explicitly consider social identities. They intentionally call attention to specific competences in what those students say or do. These moves must be done in timely and authentic ways with sensitivity to how students and their peers are likely to interpret and respond to the attention. Teachers can acknowledge competence publicly in whole or small groups, or in one-on-one situations, at various points across a lesson or school day. When done well, acknowledging competence disrupts narrow, reductive conceptions of content, inequitable patterns in who is seen as “smart” or “good,” and negative and deficit views that students carry of themselves.

Advancing justice through acknowledging competence

A central purpose of this practice is to disrupt patterns in which race and gender, as well as home language and ability status, shape who is seen as “smart” in class. These patterns not only affect those students who are or are not seen as “smart,” but also shape the perceptions of the other students about the identities that tend to be associated with competence (e.g., the “model minority myth” that represents Asian American students as “good at math” or the common interpretation of Black girls as disrespectful).

Teachers must understand how learning practices in school have been dominated by white Western cultural norms and preferences and work to expand their own understanding of what counts as competence in the content domains they teach. Additionally, they must consider how broader systemic factors shape everyday micro-interactions related to racism and other forms of oppression (sexism, linguicism, ableism, classism) and may contribute to risks and patterns of status hierarchies in their own classrooms. Teachers’ decisions to acknowledge particular student competence must be informed by what they know about their students as individuals and their students’ intersecting identities in order to disrupt larger patterns associated with race, gender, language, and who and what are seen as “smart.”



Decomposition of acknowledging competence

Table 1: Areas of Work and Techniques for Acknowledging Competence

Areas of work for acknowledging competence	Techniques for acknowledging competence
Attending to classroom dynamics and social positioning to identify focal students	• Notice who is seen or labeled as “smart” or “struggling” in different content domains. • Notice how students see and position themselves relative to their peers, to content, and to learning practices. • Notice how students interpret and respond to feedback and previous instances of acknowledging competence. • Using your observations, identify which students would benefit from having their competence publicly acknowledged, with particular attention to the influence of race, gender, class, language, and ability.
Eliciting demonstrations of competence	• Anticipate opportunities and plan moves to invite focal students to make meaningful contributions. • Use tasks and activities that allow students to participate and make contributions in a broad range of ways. • Listen to and observe focal students closely to notice instructionally and content-significant contributions. • Invite focal students to share their thinking and/or make meaningful contributions to classroom activity and discourse with sensitivity to their needs, preferences, and identities.



Areas of work for acknowledging competence	Techniques for acknowledging competence
Naming and highlighting competence	To broaden <i>what</i> is seen as “competent” • Develop and broaden one’s own understanding of the different kinds of competence inherent in a particular domain. • Actively listen and watch for a broad range of competence in students’ contributions. To broaden and/or disrupt <i>who</i> is seen as “competent” • Name in specific terms the significance or value of a contribution made by a focal student in the moment. • Attach the names of focal students to public records of their thinking and/or contributions. • Invite other students to listen and respond to the contributions of focal students (see orienting students to one another’s thinking tool in the TeachingWorks Resource Library). • Invite students to reflect on whom they learned from today. • Invite students to reflect on what they did that was “smart” or an important contribution or practice. • Give verbal and written feedback to focal students that makes explicit for them what was significant about what they said or did in class. To broaden and/or disrupt <i>what</i> counts as “competent” • Name, model, and explain a broad range of practices involved in learning. • Call explicit attention to significant, but often overlooked, examples of content-specific competence or learning practices. • Represent a broad range of practices involved in learning content (e.g., reasoning, developing ideas, focusing on meaning, creating and using methods and strategies, building on previously established ideas, asking questions, etc.).

