

## Theory-Informed Teaching and Mentoring Strategies for Enhancing Cultural Competence in Sport Psychology With “How-To” Examples

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### **Abstract:**

Cultural competence and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become fundamental learning objectives in sport psychology training, yet the literature lacks theory-informed strategies that support relevant teaching and mentoring efforts. Using two evidence-based instructional strategies—cooperative learning and scaffolding, we present how to apply strengths-based and cultural humility frameworks and activities to promote cultural competence through teaching or group mentorship. We also discuss how to modify these activities based on the modality, group size, and time available. Additionally, we share student feedback and our reflections on the successes, lessons learned, and recommendations for enhancing students’ cultural competence and DEI training.

**Keywords:** cultural humility | graduate training | inclusivity | mentorship | strengths-based approach

### **Article:**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and cultural competence have gained attention in the sport psychology profession and its education in recent years (Anderson, Citation2022; Lee et al., Citation2020). For instance, the Task Domains of the Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC) certification include recognizing one’s biases, engaging in self-reflective practices regarding diversity and culture, and understanding how one’s identities and their clients’ influence the consulting process (Association of Applied Sport Psychology [AASP], 2023). Accordingly, cultural competence has become a fundamental learning objective in sport psychology graduate programs, leading to increasing awareness for instructors and mentors to incorporate topics on DEI and cultural competence into their coursework and mentorship. Yet, theory-informed strategies for doing so are lacking in the sport psychology literature (Lee et al., Citation2020).

Cultural competence refers to the ability to understand and respect other cultures, be aware of one’s assumptions about culture, and develop the skills needed to maintain effective relationships by attaining DEI standards (Rodolfa et al., Citation2005). According to Lee et al.

(Citation2020), sport psychology professionals (SPPs) are often unaware of how their cultural identities impact their work and have difficulty working with diverse groups due to a lack of proper training. Additionally, Quartiroli et al. (Citation2020) found that although most SPPs in their study had received formal training for cultural competence, they generally perceived their training as moderately effective. Quartiroli et al. (Citation2020) further suggested that graduate programs integrate cultural competence content in applied training beyond coursework and that “trainings specifically focused on the development of cultural competence could also support SPPs in engaging in personal reflection aimed to further develop their personal ethnic exploration and commitment and concurrently raise awareness related to racial and cultural issues” (p. 247). Thus, to develop culturally competent graduate students who are future SPPs, instructors and mentors ought to include intentional activities and reflections relevant to students’ cultural backgrounds and identities, as well as those different from theirs. To facilitate such activities and reflections, cooperative learning and scaffolding are two instructional approaches with evidence-based strategies to consider (e.g., Hogan & Pressley, Citation1997; Johnson et al., Citation2007).

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach to constructing skills and knowledge through interactions among learners (Johnson et al., Citation2007), providing such educational benefits as active learning and a sense of belonging from working with peers. Additionally, it can aid students in seeing ideas from different perspectives, appreciating viewpoints different from theirs, and creating an inclusive environment and rapport between the instructor and students for implementing cultural competence (Shane-Simpson et al., Citation2022). Thus, cooperative learning provides a level of comfort for students to speak about their own identities openly and accept others without judgment.

Scaffolding, another instructional method often used in education, provides support by first building student understanding and then decreasing support once the topic is better understood (Hogan & Pressley, Citation1997). Further, scaffolding can involve learning to reflect and exploring alternative perspectives through experiential activities. For example, after instructors provide examples in the classroom on how to work toward and reflect on DEI and cultural competence through activities and conversations, students can share their knowledge base using similar activities and conversations with their clients when addressing DEI topics. This approach allows students to anticipate working with diverse clients and practice relevant consulting strategies in the classroom before doing so with clients.

Due to the lack of theory-informed strategies for teaching DEI and cultural competence in sport psychology, the purpose of this article is to introduce two sample theoretical frameworks and corresponding strategies that apply cooperative learning and scaffolding for teaching graduate-level courses and mentoring aspiring SPPs. Our main goal is to explain not only “what to do,” but also “how to do it,” with steps to implement specific activities and potential modifications based on the learning modality, group size, and time available for the activities. When implementing the teaching strategies and reviewing our examples, it is important to note that teaching DEI and cultural competence is content and context-specific. As such, adjustments and constant reflections are needed based on the demographics of the instructor/mentor and students/mentees and the content of the course or mentorship.

Although we have applied the teaching strategies in various courses, our examples and student/mentee feedback primarily came from a graduate-level practicum class, which met weekly for two hours to discuss various applied consulting concepts and cases. This practicum class typically consisted of 10–12 second-year master’s students, who worked with individual clients and sport teams on mental performance issues. As the institution is situated in the Midwestern

U.S., most of the students (evenly distributed across gender) were White and grew up in surrounding areas with similar cultural backgrounds and upbringings. Meanwhile, some students held underrepresented and marginalized identities (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, low SES). The second author, a teaching assistant (TA) who had also participated in the practicum class as a graduate student, shared similarities in many identities with most students. She was a cisgender, White female student who grew up in the Midwestern U.S. and held the marginalized identities of being a young female in a sport-related profession. On the other hand, the first author, the instructor of the course, held many identities different from those of the students. He was a cisgender, Asian male early professional born and raised in Asia, with identities (e.g., non-citizen, non-English first language) that are underrepresented and marginalized in the institution and the sport psychology profession. In addition to being the instructor of the practicum course, he also taught two other courses in the master's program and mentored half of the students as their practicum supervisors.

At the time when the activities were delivered, the instructor had completed multiple trainings in teaching DEI in sport psychology and higher education, positive psychology including strengths-based approaches (as part of his graduate education), and cultural humility in working with clients and mentees. Although the TA had not had training in these areas within a teaching context, she had utilized strengths and identity-based concepts in her consulting.

### **Framework 1: strengths-based approach**

Strengths-based approaches, grounded in positive psychology and more recently applied to sport psychology, enact change toward a goal by capitalizing on an individual's assets (Castillo & Bird, Citation2022). Clinical supervisors have begun to integrate strengths-based approaches into their work to promote a safe, multicultural learning environment, which promotes relationship-building and supervisee engagement (Wiley et al., Citation2021). Sport psychology instructors and mentors can also apply strengths-based approaches to foster scaffolding and student learning about cultural competence, like how SPPs implement them in consulting with athletes.

#### ***Strengths Bingo***

The original instruction of the Strengths Bingo activity (<https://www.viacharacter.org/pdf/TopStrengthsBingo.pdf>) asks people to identify their top five strengths, mark them on the bingo card, and then converse with their family members. The goal of the conversation is to learn about family members' strengths and mark them on the card to see who can get bingo first. In a practicum class or mentorship group, this activity could be used as a strengths-spotting exercise. Strengths-spotting—labeling the character strengths observed in an individual with examples—is a staple practice of character strengths shown to promote positive psychological and performance outcomes across domains including education (Chu, Citation2022; Niemiec, Citation2019).

Strengths Bingo is a signature activity that applies strengths-spotting. The activity involves cooperative learning as students work together to provide comments on each other's strengths from diverse perspectives. Moreover, Strengths Bingo integrates a scaffolding approach for students to not only learn about but also practice a strengths-based activity with their peers before utilizing it with their clients. Through conversations with peers, students often notice their own strengths that they were not aware of before. Thus, Strengths Bingo could promote a sense of competence, belonging, and connection (Chu, Citation2022). Our version of Strengths Bingo also fosters inclusivity as students are provided with reflection prompts to utilize strengths-based approaches

in working with clients from diverse backgrounds. Sample prompts include, “How would you apply your (and your clients’) strengths when working with clients from different cultural backgrounds from yours?”, and “How would you implement strengths-spotting to help clients with various intersectional identities identify and utilize their strengths to achieve their goals?”

To conduct the activity, the instructor or mentor would invite students to discuss with their fellow students in rotating pairs (or small groups) to learn about their partner’s top five strengths and provide specific examples of how they have observed their partner apply those strengths (i.e., strengths-spotting). Our activity looks like the following:

- Students complete assigned readings on the strengths-based approach and the VIA character strengths assessment (<https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>) on their own prior to the practicum class.
- The instructor provides a Strengths Bingo card (<https://www.viacharacter.org/pdf/TopStrengthsBingo.pdf>) to each student and explains the activity during class.
- Students walk around the room to share their top five strengths with a partner in rotating pairs.
- After learning about the top five strengths of their partner within the pair, the student shares one example of a strength that they observe in their partner (e.g., “I saw you using your leadership strength when taking charge in facilitating the meeting discussions with the coaches”) in order to check off that strength on their bingo card. Then, the two students switch roles for the partner to state their top five strengths for the student to exemplify.
- The rotation continues until the scheduled time ends or a student has bingo.
- The instructor invites students to share their thoughts and reactions regarding the activity and how they could apply it to their consulting and promotion of DEI and cultural competence.

This activity could be easily adapted to an online modality by setting up breakout rooms for students to rotate in the discussions. For a larger class or group size, the instructor could set up groups of 3–5 students so that students could learn about their fellow students’ strengths more efficiently without taking up as much time as rotating pairs. Additionally, in situations with time constraints, students could share one or two of the top five strengths they want examples for and allow their partners to choose only from those selected strengths. The instructor could also gather and share all students’ top strengths before the activity, such that students begin brainstorming examples of their peers’ strengths to deliver them more promptly during the activity. This approach may also allow enough time for students who prefer to prepare and may struggle to think of examples spontaneously, especially if students are not as familiar with some of their peers in the group.

## **Framework 2: cultural humility**

Cultural humility, a recently popularized concept for building working alliances with diverse clients and improving treatment outcomes in helping professions (e.g., counseling, medicine), refers to “the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client [or supervisee]” (Hook et al., Citation2013, p. 354). In addition to an interpersonal component, cultural humility involves an intrapersonal component—a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby an

individual examines their own cultural identities and beliefs beyond learning about those of others. As SPPs interact with diverse clients and teams, cultural humility would be considered an essential consulting skill, which can be gained through intentional activities and reflections on personal and social identities (e.g., race, religion) with a humble approach.

### *The Spectrum Activity*

The Spectrum Activity (also called Questions of Identity) uses the social identity wheel (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nQVGAWF8-zRdLnQrhEXViXCYtCKDOVIR/view>), a framework and activity that helps students reflect on how people identify socially (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, ability status) and how those social identities influence others' perceptions and treatment (University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, n.d.). The goals of the activity are to (1) illustrate how privilege contributes to advantages or disadvantages of certain identities over others and how the context (e.g., sport, work) matters; (2) encourage students to think critically about their different identities and privileges that they might not have been aware of; and (3) help students recognize some shared identities and corresponding challenges in the class/group and unique challenges that others might face, further developing their cultural humility, sense of community, and empathy.

The Spectrum Activity applies cooperative learning strategies as it encourages students to work in small groups, talk about their social identities and their impacts, and understand each other's identities that they may not easily share. The cooperative learning nature of the activity enhances cultural humility in students' personal and professional views by challenging their presumptions and potential stereotypes about different identities, which influence their rapport and effectiveness in consulting with diverse clients (Lee et al., Citation2020). Furthermore, the social identity wheel provides scaffolding for students to discuss with their clients the impacts of personal and social identities (e.g., oppression) on sport experiences, such as clients' relationships with coaches and teammates and their perceived abilities to succeed.

Instructors and mentors could facilitate the Spectrum Activity in various forms, such as a pen-and-paper exercise and an active experiential activity. The key is to use social identities as a foundation with questions for reflections, as well as small or large group discussions, related to various social contexts in students' personal and professional lives. Our experiential activity looks like the following:

1. Before the class starts, the instructor hangs papers with written common social identities on the walls around the classroom.
2. At the beginning of the activity, the instructor asks students to stand and then asks a series of questions about personal and social identities, such as the following, for students to walk to the spot in the room that represents their response to each question:
  - a. What is the identity that you think about most often?
  - b. What is the identity that you think about least often?
  - c. What is the identity that people misunderstand you the most?
  - d. What is the identity that gives you the greatest advantage in the current practicum/consulting setting?
  - e. What is the identity that gives you the greatest disadvantage in the current practicum/consulting setting?

3. After students walk to the spot, the instructor asks them to discuss with fellow students who stand in the same or nearby spots their reasons for choosing their answers.
4. After going through all the questions, the instructor asks everyone to return to their seat and then asks additional reflection questions about what they noticed from the exercise. Students then share with the whole class their observations, thoughts, and feelings related to DEI and cultural humility in personal and professional contexts.

The Spectrum Activity could be adapted to an online modality by using a digital interactive whiteboard for students to see everyone's thoughts and reactions to the activity, or by setting up breakout rooms for students to rotate in the discussions. For a larger class or group, the instructor could break the class up into groups of four to six students who possess different social identities and know each other fairly well. In this way, when learning about and from each other, students would feel comfortable sharing and being vulnerable. Considering the sensitive nature of the questions and prompts about culture and identity, instructors and mentors could present students and mentees with the social identities and relevant questions at least several days in advance for students to prepare their answers and choose what to share or not share. This pre-discussion preparation could work particularly well for a larger group of students or mentees who do not know each other that well or for situations with greater time constraints. Moreover, instructors and mentors could encourage students and mentees to brainstorm important social identities to consider instead of, or in addition to, providing them with the ones available in the social identity wheel. This approach might further foster student autonomy and inclusivity.

### **Reflections and lessons learned**

Reflections are important for students who learn about DEI and cultural competence as well as for instructors who facilitate relevant activities and discussions. As such, we reflected on our implementation of the activities and approaches (i.e., cooperative learning and scaffolding) and lessons learned based on written feedback from course evaluation, verbal comments from students, and our own experience.

The written feedback from the practicum course evaluation had multiple evaluation criteria (e.g., course organization, intellectual development) on a scale from 1 to 10 (range = 7.33–9.11). Across these criteria, the item on the “importance and relevance of the course for your own development in terms of appreciating new perspectives, broadening your outlook, and understanding social issues” had the highest mean score (9.11). Regarding the open-ended question, “Did the instructor foster an inclusive environment where students were treated with respect and their questions and perspectives were welcomed, including students from diverse backgrounds and identities? How did the instructor accomplish this?”, most students quoted the Spectrum Activity, which helped them learn about various social identities, as well as relevant biases and stereotypes, of their own and others. Students also indicated that the class activities helped build a sense of community, trust, and belonging, especially since they learned about fellow students' identities and perspectives that they valued but did not know about before.

Through informal conversations, several students, including those who held unique underrepresented identities in the practicum class, shared that they thoroughly enjoyed both the Spectrum and Strengths Bingo Activities. They commented that the instructor's intentionality in validating students' feelings shared during discussions and that his insights into cultural identities

were particularly helpful. Additionally, students expressed that since they had known the instructor and formed close relationships with their cohort for a year before the practicum course, the activities were not notably uncomfortable to them. Throughout the practicum experience, multiple students shared that they had applied their character strengths and cultural humility in working with clients and implemented the same activities, especially Strengths Bingo, in their consulting for team building and DEI topics (e.g., recognizing cultural differences in communication with international student-athletes). Thus, scaffolding seemed to have helped students be aware of cultural contexts in sport to implement culturally responsive interventions.

From our experience, Strengths Bingo and the Spectrum Activity offered the opportunity to practice cultural humility both within and beyond the practicum course. The cooperative learning and scaffolding approaches helped students feel empowered and more connected, as evidenced by our observations and students' written and verbal feedback. A lesson learned from these successes is that these instructional approaches are ideally used throughout a practicum course or group mentorship setting for students or mentees to learn about and from each other. Further, cooperative learning and scaffolding provide instructors and mentors with the opportunity to learn about their students and to build trust, relationships, and mutual respect early. These early interactions could help students be more willing to feel vulnerable and discuss sensitive topics related to DEI and cultural competence later. Another element that we found helpful is the incorporation of mutually agreed upon ground rules (e.g., how everyone should interact, behave, and express their ideas) developed by students in the practicum course. The use of ground rules starting on Day 1 promotes culturally responsive teaching and learning by creating a "brave space" for students/mentees and the instructor/mentor to authentically respond to the experiences shared in the class/group (Anderson, Citation2022). Meanwhile, we have to acknowledge that the groups we worked with were relatively cohesive and homogenous in terms of identities. Teaching or mentoring groups with very different cultural backgrounds, social identities, or opinions about DEI may require additional considerations (e.g., how to form groups) and time to build mutual trust and respect when implementing ground rules and the mentioned activities.

Regarding the use of scaffolding, we found it helpful to provide applied readings (e.g., Castillo & Bird, Citation2022; Schinke et al., Citation2016), which students reportedly enjoyed and found relevant to their practice, rather than empirical research articles. Integrating assignments (e.g., brainstorming new ways to apply their top five strengths) could also be helpful for holding students accountable for applying what they learned from the classroom to working with clients. At the same time, a few students did mention that some assignments were time-consuming given their busy schedules with class, work, and consulting. Thus, an alternative approach to assess student learning through scaffolding could include weekly check-ins or group conversations about how students have applied the strengths-based approach or cultural humility in their consulting. This approach, aligned with Quartiroli et al.'s (Citation2020) call for integrating cultural competence in applied training, would allow for learning from each other through case discussions in place of individual assignments that only the instructor would read.

Concerning the logistics of the activities, we had two lessons learned that revolved around the social identities within the class or group and the time arrangements. For Strengths Bingo, it could be challenging for students to think of strength examples for fellow students whom they might not know well. For the Spectrum Activity, it might be difficult for a student who is the only one with a specific identity (e.g., gender-nonconforming) to share their identities and experiences. Therefore, beyond building mutual respect, trust, and relationships, the instructor or mentor should emphasize that any form of disclosure in the activity is voluntary and provide broad enough

discussion questions, like the ones provided earlier, for students to choose whether or not to talk about more vulnerable aspects of their identities. The approach of asking broad questions could also apply to the large group debrief after small group discussions. Moreover, every class or group has its own comfort level and pace of discussing DEI and cultural competence concepts. Instructors and mentors should plan enough reflection questions but be flexible with not discussing all of them depending on students' comfort levels and discussion pace. Although some level of discomfort may be a sign of cultural humility and growth (Hook et al., Citation2013), the instructor or mentor should make themselves available to debrief with students individually if the discomfort provokes distress or even traumas. Therefore, the instructor or mentor should have several post-activity check-ins over a few meetings. Essentially, the instructor or mentor must be culturally responsive and flexible in arranging the activities and allotting time for conversations.

Beyond the influence of the activities on students and their cultural competence, we also reflected on the influence of such activities on the training of SPPs more broadly and on us. Through the instructional strategies and activities we discussed, we believe that sport psychology graduate programs could better fulfill the responsibility to understand, teach, and incorporate cultural competence advocated by scholars over the past two decades (e.g., Fisher et al., Citation2005; Ryba & Wright, Citation2010). Activities that aid students in learning more about underrepresented and marginalized identities and hearing their voices give perspectives of what marginalized athletes may experience and struggle with in light of current athletic systems and societies. Identifying and discussing social identities and their marginalization, representation, and privileges helps students and SPPs move toward building cultural praxis initiatives in the communities within which the sport psychology profession serves (Ryba & Wright, Citation2010). Doing so results in increased awareness of social identities, of oneself and others, that can help SPPs better challenge existing norms and policies to advocate for social justice and systemic changes (Fisher et al., Citation2005).

Delivering DEI and cultural competence concepts and activities positively impacted us. We both recognized our discomfort with delivering these concepts and activities to students the first time and worried about the potential "backfire." These discomforts and worries stemmed from concerns about "saying the wrong thing" or not being knowledgeable enough about certain cultures and identities. Yet, we noticed that these feelings could indeed be conducive as they provided opportunities for us to practice and model cultural humility (Hook et al., Citation2013). Acknowledging, rather than avoiding, these feelings encouraged us to share with students our roles of being learners along with them and to provide the space for them to be the "teacher" when discussing personal and social identities (e.g., disability, SES) not immediately apparent to others and relevant experiences. Moreover, we realized that conversations about certain identities (e.g., age, gender), which students commonly shared, were easier to hold than others (e.g., religion, sexual orientation). However, we discovered that the more "difficult" conversations facilitated our growth as the instructor and TA the most. Those difficult conversations led us to reflect on our biases and presumptions about certain identities and better facilitate a welcoming and nonjudgmental environment in the classroom, which then enhanced our cultural competence and effectiveness of delivering DEI concepts and activities to diverse students.

Individually, facilitating activities about DEI and cultural competence in the practicum course encouraged the instructor, who also served as a mentor, to have further conversations with his mentees about those concepts during individual mentorship meetings. The instructor also had become more intentional about practicing cultural humility in his mentorship by considering the viewpoints of mentees not only as consultants but also as people with intersectional identities.



Having participated, observed, and assisted with the implementation of these activities allowed the TA, who was developing her skills and philosophies in consulting and teaching, to explore and gain tools such as strengths-based approaches in her repertoire. As a result, she gained confidence in building relationships with diverse clients and students in the future.

## Conclusion

In this article, we introduced a strengths-based approach (Niemic, Citation2019; Wiley et al., Citation2021) and a cultural humility framework (Hook et al., Citation2013), alongside corresponding activities, to promote DEI and cultural competence through sport psychology teaching and mentorship. Additionally, we showed and advocated for the use of evidence-based instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning (Hogan & Pressley, Citation1997) and scaffolding (Johnson et al., Citation2007), to explain “how to do it” with examples. We hope these ideas and examples could inspire further research and application of theory-informed teaching and mentoring strategies in the profession. Meanwhile, DEI and cultural competence need to be integrated throughout the sport psychology curriculum and ongoing mentorship. Having just a few classes or mentorship sessions about these concepts is not enough for students to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Instead, cultural competence requires continuous practice (e.g., working with diverse clients) and reflection. Thus, instructors and mentors should provide students and mentees with structured opportunities to share their genuine thoughts on DEI topics, provide honest feedback to each other respectfully, and “make mistakes” (vs. avoid mistakes by disengaging) in low-stake and supportive interactions about different cultural perspectives. Doing so could enhance cultural humility and the ability to respond to occasional missteps, such as by appropriately apologizing for misconceptions about a client’s culture, in future personal and professional endeavors.

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