

Fostering Inclusivity in an Online Classroom

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Online Learning, by its very nature, fosters diversity; but, diversity does not equal inclusion (Tienda 2013). It is our job as instructors to make sure that all students we engage with feel included.

Online classes are composed of distance learning and online learning students; two distinct populations. Moreover, distance learning opens the door to more non-traditional students, including more students of color and students from lower SES backgrounds.

You are **likely** to encounter students in your online classroom who:

- ❖ are differently abled
- ❖ speak English as a second language
- ❖ perceive status inequalities
- ❖ have widely diverse professional and educational backgrounds
- ❖ are very introverted
- ❖ have widely diverse belief systems
- ❖ experience a generation gap

If you don't plan and work for inclusion in your course the consequences can be severe:

- Students stop participating in discussion and lose motivation for completion (Xie et al. 2006).
- Students may become attacking toward one another.
- Students may experience intense feelings of isolation.
- Students may disengage with university and drop out.

Avoiding these Pitfalls!

It Starts Early With Course Preparation

1. Make sure that all assignment and discussions clearly align with course goals.
2. Have someone else review your course materials prior to putting them online.
This need not be another faculty member - it could even be a student or friend.
3. Make sure all online content meets the needs of differentially abled learners.
 - a. <https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG20/glance/>
4. In addition to the syllabus, provide information about the structure of the course and how to navigate the course. Course organization is important.
 - a. Keys to success in the class—**let them know online classes are hard!**
 - b. Timeline & calendar--when things are due and how/where to submit them
 - c. Information on how to communicate professionally in an online forum
 - d. Where to go for assistance if need technological help
 - e. Info on common tech issues and how to handle them

- f. Where to go for assistance if they are struggling emotionally—post access to counseling, disability and multicultural services and understand the options for distance students.
5. Provide multiple avenues for different types of communication & information about how and when to use each of these different communication channels
 - a. Personal forums for students to interact with you and with each other
 - b. Discussion board for discussing the key content of the course
 - c. Email list for the entire class
 - d. Personal email communication/some kind of private chat option with you
 - e. Question thread
 6. Be repetitive with information, have systems for accountability and include checkpoints for information.

The First Week of Class

1. Communication, Communication, Communication –***Make sure you have personally connected with each student in the first week***
 - a. Personal Welcome Message Shared Through Private Forum or Email
 - b. Introductions on Personal Thread – or Group Chat Room
 - c. Welcome message to the class overall
 - d. Post week 1 deliverables
 - e. Checkpoints for organizational material
 - f. Start Question Thread
2. Get to know your students more personally in the Group or Personal Thread
This is the place where we become human not bots—and very important step to reducing interpersonal conflict in future discussion threads.
 - a. Maybe post videos of self
 - b. Encourage students to post videos and bios
 - c. Ice breaker type questions
 - d. Continue these discussions all semester long
 - e. Work to foster peer-to-peer connections

Best Practices All Semester Long

1. Response Time and Tone Matter
 - a. Frequently log-in and monitor and manage discussions
 - b. Grade timelier than you would in an on-campus course; can reduce feelings of isolation and uncertainty
 - c. Know how you are going to manage responses in discussions
 - i. When to delete, to private message, to respond to entire class
 - ii. Tip: Think about how students are likely to respond to certain questions before the class and have resources prepared to guide them to. Outside resources make it seem less like you are attacking an individual based on your opinion over theirs.
2. Always use the sandwich method for feedback
3. Provide weekly summaries of what was learned & recaps of each discussion

Additional Resources

➤ ***Handling Challenging Issues- Best Practice Tips***

- Breathing time when responding to requests (but not too long)
- When responding to conflict, make sure that you show that you have listened
- Know the steps at your university for unresolved issues
- Having clear guidelines helps as well – refer back to them
- Scheduling in-person meetings with on-campus students or web-chat with online students can be helpful; phone conversations on the other hand can be as impersonal as email and can sometimes lead to greater escalation of issues.

➤ ***Example of Guide for Online Discussion***

You are responsible for posting substantive messages in our discussion forum at least 4 times during the week. (actually provide the link or some direction to where to do that here).

Understanding how to communicate in an online environment can be challenging, here are some suggestions to help you.

- ✓ Avoid using UPPER CASE LETTERS OR ! It makes it seem like you are yelling.
- ✓ Reread your posts before sending. Make sure that they could not be interpreted as attacking. Edit for grammar.
- ✓ Posts should always be about ideas and not about people.
- ✓ Personal stories or personal comments to peers should be made in the personal communication thread.
- ✓ You may think about how a course concept has practical applications to your own life, but avoid using a personal story as evidence of a claim.
- ✓ Just because an issue might not seem controversial to you, it might to someone else, always keep that in mind when you write your messages.

What is a substantive post? It...

- ✓ Critically questions an idea from the readings or something that a peer or teacher posted.
- ✓ Applies a concept from the course or something that we are discussing to real world applications.
- ✓ Explains why you disagree or agree with an idea based on what you reading and learning.
- ✓ Needs to be longer than 25 words to fully express idea.

Good Example: I like your post Kendra. It made me think about how we tend to treat race as a biological attribute but how it can actually really change. I never thought about it this way. What does this mean then for genetic testing that I see advertised on TV?

Bad Example: Great post Kendra. I agree with your point about race.

References

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Example to work through & Questions?

You are teaching an online course and the following conversation arises in your online discussion.

Student 1: All of the material we are covering is liberal bias. I feel like white people are just getting slammed in this class; hey I don't have it easy okay.

Reply from Student 2: I'm glad somebody finally spoke up, I feel like this whole class has been about being PC. I don't even want to read the book, black lives aren't any different, so why should their lives matter more.

Reply from Student 3: I'm a black student at this university and you both just evidence why this university is so RACIST!

1. How would you respond to these posts that have occurred?
 1. What kind of private communication would you have with these students?
 2. What would you post in the forum?
 3. Would you delete any/all of these messages?
2. What concerns should you have about the entire class?
 1. Who may feel isolated?
 2. How may the dynamics of your class changed?
3. What are some steps that could have prevented this from getting to this point?