

ADVICE

6 Quick Ways to Be More Inclusive in a Virtual Classroom

How do you create online or hybrid courses with an ethos of inclusion and equity embedded throughout?

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If you're teaching this fall, you're probably trying to figure out how your courses will be affected by the dual reverberations of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter. Being prepared for an uncertain semester means both improving your remote-teaching skills and finding ways to make your classroom more inclusive.

The two aims overlap, given that online teaching will figure heavily in the coming semester. As someone who has taught in virtual classrooms for 12 years, I have been writing this series on quick, practical ways [to get better](#) at online teaching (for latecomers, here's [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)). This month's column turns to inclusive teaching in a virtual classroom.

The ethos of an [equitable and inclusive classroom](#) is simple: "Everybody gets to

learn. No one has to out themselves. All are welcome. All are supported by the very *design* of this class.” The hard part: How do you create online or hybrid courses with that ethos embedded throughout? Two frameworks in your teaching toolkit — Universal Design for Learning and culturally responsive pedagogy — create a powerful way forward. Let’s look at each in turn.

Universal Design for Learning. UDL takes research on how people learn and [applies it](#) to course design and teaching. A good way to think about this is to consider the concept of “universal design” in architecture. Picture a ramp alongside a set of stairs; both lead up to a building entrance. The ramp was constructed to help wheelchair users get where they want to go — that is, into the building. But the ramp benefits others, too: people using walkers, strollers, luggage on wheels, or cargo dollies. The ramp wasn’t originally conceived for them but once it’s in place, they benefit from it, too.

UDL applies that idea to the classroom. It’s about offering choices — akin to the stairs or the ramp — to support learning and get students where they want to go. With UDL, you can plan your course from the outset in ways that, while they lower barriers to learning for students with certain needs, benefit all students.

Specifically, this approach flips the idea of needing to provide an accommodation in class for a student with disabilities — something that risks stigmatizing the student and imposes extra work on a faculty member. Instead of rushing to adapt to a last-minute accommodation for a particular student, UDL helps you design “ramps” as part of your course, so they’re already in place for anyone who needs (or wants) to take advantage of them.

A classic example of UDL for an online course is providing captions for or transcripts of videos. Prerecorded videos (as [I’ve noted before](#)) are a great way to communicate and build connections with online students. Besides being easy to

create, videos are a powerful means of explaining complicated concepts and are more efficient than Zoom teaching (for those who like videoconferencing, check out “[8 Ways to Be More Inclusive in Your Zoom Teaching](#)”). You can reuse your videos in future semesters, too, if you make the content evergreen.

But videos need captions in order to be of use to students with hearing loss. Instead of letting that extra step — and extra work — stop you from creating videos, think of it as a way to lower barriers for everyone in your class. Many students prefer to read along while they watch an instructional video; it helps them absorb and process information. A text transcript is a good alternative to captions (or you can offer both). Some students like to print out transcripts, take notes on them, and then use them to study for a quiz. The point again: By offering this option to help students with hearing loss, you aid all students.

Ready to use UDL in designing your online courses for the fall? There are loads of options, but here are some simple, practical ideas to get you started:

- **Provide the same course content in two different formats.** I just mentioned a good example of this — videos with captions — but there are many other ways to do it. Give students a piece of text, and offer the same content in a visual format such as a chart or [infographic](#). Or, when you ask students to read a chapter of the textbook, make an audio file of you reading it, so students can “read” it on the go or to absorb new ideas in a way that works best for them.
- **Allow two options for how students can complete an assignment.** For example, permit them to submit a weekly reflection on their learning either in writing or by smartphone video. Some students process information and express their ideas better in speech than in writing.
- **Offer students a choice in completing a final project.** Will a research paper or a video presentation enable students to achieve the learning goals and show

what they know? Let them decide which one they prefer to create.

Does all of this sound like a lot of work for faculty members? It doesn't have to be. Nor does it have to cost a lot of time or money. Thomas J. Tobin, a distance-learning guru at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, advocates a "plus-one" approach to UDL: Simply add one option to help your students engage with the content in ways they prefer. For more, listen to [his interview](#) on Bonni Stachowiak's [Teaching in Higher Ed podcast](#), or read his [recent book](#), written with Kirsten T. Behling, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (West Virginia University Press, 2018).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. An equally important consideration for the fall is how you will [support culturally diverse learners](#) in your online courses. Especially at this moment in American history, you must think critically about how to help Black, Latinx, and other students in historically underrepresented groups succeed in your online (or in-person) courses.

Courtney Plotts is a [researcher and educator](#) who specializes in supporting culturally diverse students in online classes. Her [recent interview](#) on the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast is a good place to start. There and elsewhere, she argues that online classes function in very transactional and Eurocentric ways. Students who do best in online courses, she says, are self-directed learners, have been shaped by cultures that value individual well-being, or both. What about students from cultures that value community over individual success? What about students who, for a variety of good reasons, don't possess a strong self-identity, or who feel uncertain or worried about asking the instructor for help?

This is a complicated, sensitive subject. But again, there are simple, practical things you can do to be more equitable and inclusive in your online teaching. Here are a

few of Plotts's suggestions:

- **Lead an exercise asking students to help set classroom values.** Create a [Padlet](#) (an online visual Post-it board with [limitless uses in teaching](#)), and ask students to post words and images that represent what's important to them in a classroom. Students might come up with things like respecting all perspectives, creating and maintaining a safe space for all, engaging in civil discourse, using person-centered language, etc. You can refine their ideas into a list or leave them gloriously unstructured on Padlet. Revisit these co-constructed values throughout the term, asking how well the class is doing in upholding them. You can try an anonymous survey or poll, a classwide discussion, or both, for different purposes.
- **“Which picture best describes how you're feeling?”** Here's a quick exercise (another good use of Padlet) to help you gauge how students of different backgrounds feel about your online course. Provide a variety of images — a serene landscape, a feisty cat, a race car, a stormy sea cliff, a mournful hound dog — and ask students to write or record themselves talking about which one best represents how they feel, whether about online learning, about the fall semester, about the subject matter, or about anything else you want to know about. Best suited for a small class, this activity shows students that you care about them as people and are not fixated on just their meeting class deadlines. Follow up by emailing those students who selected images that conveyed anxiety or other negative emotions, and periodically check in with them throughout the semester.
- **Remind them to reach out to you for help.** Be aware, Plotts says, that students from some cultural backgrounds may hesitate to ask an instructor for assistance. The same goes for introverted students. In remote teaching, you can use announcements, short recorded videos, and email messages to encourage students to contact you, even if it's outside their comfort zone.

Repeat that message frequently enough for them to believe you mean it. Use a warm and encouraging tone. Respond quickly to their emails and questions. All of that will encourage students to take you up on your offer.

Be patient with yourself as you try these new approaches. Both UDL and culturally responsive pedagogy can feel overwhelming. So do just one new thing this fall. Add another in the spring, or improve upon your approach from the fall. We say we support our students. We say we want all of them to learn and succeed. Let's show them we mean it by working to lower barriers in our course design.

If you have questions or concerns about this article, please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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