Student-Centered Guidance for Encouraging Inclusive, Online Learning Environments

"Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." – John Wooden

Wherever and whatever a student studies, the chances are now higher than ever they will take an online course for part, if not all, of their academic program. For the 2020-2021 academic year and beyond, data suggest that an increasing number of courses and programs will be delivered online. Over the past nine months, faculty-focused articles that explore how to develop positive online learning environments have proliferated. While these faculty-focused tips and strategies are of great value, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact students can have on their own learning experience. Students have the power to seize their present reality to help build the type of online learning environment they desire and deserve.

All educators can, and should, "learn to take reflexive action…in order to teach in an emancipatory manner that liberates"[i] students and educators (Boutte, 2016, p. 43). Applied to virtual classrooms, instructors can partner with students to create more equitable, more just, and more rewarding online learning environments. For online students who often study remotely amidst a diverse student and instructor population, nurturing and sustaining an inclusive learning environment may feel daunting. This article includes shareable tips that are intended to encourage online students to reflect positively and intentionally on the diversity they bring to their online classrooms and highlights actionable strategies that promote a collaborative and mindfully multicultural online classroom.

Build a Community

While students might at times feel like they are undertaking online coursework in isolation, they are not alone. Encourage them to reach out to their online peers, make connections, and create community. Instructors can also create general forums where students are able to communicate in more casual ways. Students can use these optional forums to share experiences, ask questions, and develop peer-to-peer connections. Instructors can ask students to track their weekly discussion board responses to promote equity across replies shared with other students throughout a course or term. Encourage students to respond to different peers each week. Remind students to prioritize warmth, support, and authenticity in all interactions, pause and review all emails and posts for tone and clarity before sending or submitting, and wait 24 hours before responding to an upsetting email or post.

Encourage students to consider steps they can take to actively, intentionally, and purposefully improve their ability to collaborate and work with people who are different from themselves. Remind students about their personal power to commit to respecting all individuals by demonstrating honesty and transparency in all communications; listening and reading with purpose; expressing appreciation for peer contributions; practicing nonjudgmental behaviors; demonstrating reliability in all group assignments; and using humor with care and respect for others.

The following charts can be used as reflection and community building tools:

Who Am I?

Name:	Professional experiences:
Educational background:	Aspirations:
Geographic background:	Educational goals:
Ethnic background:	Family:
Cultural background:	Hobbies and interests:
Gender:	Anything else:

What Can I Learn From Peers Who Are Different From Myself?

Questions:
Observations:
Reflections:
Applications to the course content:
New ways of thinking about the world:
Anything else:

Use Questions as Reflection Tools

Never underestimate the learning potential of a question. Questions are powerful tools to resolve confusion, gain clarity, and promote learning. When students first begin an online course, they may feel overwhelmed. This is to be expected. Encourage them to pause, breathe, and take time to read through all

materials and write down their questions. If after reading all course materials, instructor announcements, and instructor emails, students still have questions, encourage them to seek answers! Remind them that if they find content unclear or confusing, they are likely not alone. Encourage students to proactively reach out with questions and concerns and to seek the support of their peers. After all, we are all in this together!

To prompt intentional and ongoing reflection, instructors might ask students to consider the following questions:

- How well do my actions model and support an inclusive and safe learning environment for my peers?

- Is my choice of language supportive and curious?

- Have I acknowledged, embraced, and celebrated the unique backgrounds and experiences of others in my classroom?

Digging deeper, instructors may ask students to fill out the following chart for a more in-depth self-examination of their written work:

Effective Questions for Maximizing Learning and Decreasing Assumptions

Do I address my peers by name?	Do I adopt a professional, respectful tone?
Have I included scholarly support for my responses?	Do I acknowledge opposing arguments?
Are my opinions based on scholarly research?	Have I reviewed my arguments for logical errors?
Have I considered alternative perspectives?	Do I use grammatically correct sentences?
Is my writing clear?	Do I pose thoughtful questions in response to my peers' perspectives?
Are my positions fully developed?	Do I ask sincere and genuine questions to better understand counter arguments and examples?

Evaluation

Each course and course assignment provide an opportunity for evaluation and an associated chance to improve equity in our classrooms. Ongoing evaluation and reflection are critical components of growth, fairness, and multiculturalism. Whenever possible, encourage students to share feedback on course assignments and assess supplemental resources for author diversity. Students should feel empowered to share course design feedback to raise awareness of potential oversights and opportunities for more representative curriculum. Remind students to complete course evaluations honestly and thoroughly so their experiences and recommendations can contribute to further improvements to their learning environment.

Personalization

Students may enter their online courses feeling vulnerable and unsure. Some may feel angry and doubt their ability to succeed. Assure them that other students in the class may feel the same way. There are many ways students can help each other feel that they belong. Remind students to make note of each other's preferred names, pronouns, and areas of interest. Encourage students to demonstrate warmth, inclusivity, and support in all communications and to actively seek out what makes other students unique. Suggest students share personal anecdotes and narratives to humanize interactions. Encourage questions that express interest in cultural backgrounds and the etymology of unusual names.

The following guidelines and reminders might be shared with students:

- Address peers by name in all posts. Consider sharing a document that curates students' preferred names.

- Celebrate diversity through warm, inclusive, and supportive responses.

- Sign all posts with your preferred name.

- Use digital tools to help share your personality, such as Bitmoji, Voki, and Screencastify.

Private Interactions

Private communications are just as critical as class-wide, public communications. Again, remind students not to assume preferred gender pronouns in emails and to address other students and their instructor by name. Phone conversations can often help personalize instruction, build relationships, and clarify misunderstandings. Ask students to consider sharing audio recordings for name pronunciations and to strive to pronounce all names properly.

It's important to acknowledge that we all bring our own biases, many unrecognized, to our classrooms. Continuously search for your own implicit biases that may unintentionally and unknowingly impact and influence classroom dynamics and learning, and ask your students to do the same.

Continue to reflect and further the conversation, as these strategies are only small steps in an ongoing journey. Enjoy learning in your online learning communities!

"The highest result of education is tolerance." – Helen Keller

Jennifer Schneider, *Team Lead, Adjunct Faculty*

For more information, contact the author at Southern New Hampshire University, j.schneider@snhu.edu.

References
[i] Boutte, G. (2016). Educating African American Students: And How Are the Children? Routledge.