

Beyond the Digital Roster: Ten Ways to Promote Multicultural Education in the Online Technical and Community College Classroom

Over the past decade, online programs have become an increasingly common method of learning for an increasingly diverse student population (Allen and Seaman). A recent study conducted by Digital Learning Compass found that the number of students taking online courses has reached over six million nationally and other reports suggest there are also millions of K-12 students learning online (Herold). Many of these students will go on to study online at community and technical colleges around the world.

This diverse group of learners prompts reflection on teaching strategies and inclusivity. Gollnick and Chinn write that “[m]ulticultural education is a construct that acknowledges the diversity of students and their families and builds on the diversity to promote equality and social justice in education” (19). They go on to say that, for multicultural education “to become a reality in the formal school situation, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education” (25). Online learning environments are no exception to these standards. The following list suggests ten actionable strategies to help acknowledge and draw upon the diverse cultural backgrounds of all students in online classrooms.

1. Reflection

Questions are powerful tools that can spark curiosity, awareness, and action. To prompt intentional and ongoing reflection on your role as an online instructor, consider the following questions:

- What types of messages might my language and choice of content in the online classroom convey?
- How well do my online actions model and support a mindfully multicultural environment for all students?
- How might I more deliberately learn about, acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate unique backgrounds and experiences in my online classroom?

2. First Impressions

Before beginning an online course, instructors can (and should) evaluate course shells from the lens and perspectives of entering students. Arthur Dobrin writes a great article titled “The Power of First Impressions” for Psychology Today that I suggest online educators read before reviewing course shells. Then, have a colleague

or a peer from outside of academia review your course design (or take as objective a vantage point as possible) and consider:

- As a student in this course, what might seem unclear or confusing?
- How might I more intentionally welcome all students upon entry into the virtual classroom?
- Does the course layout, structure, and content model inclusivity at all times?
- Are all components of the course accessible to all students?

3. Evaluation

There are resources that help educators evaluate written text, websites, course shells, content, and ourselves for inclusivity and multicultural competency. Two multiculturalism assessment tools are [Criteria for Evaluating Multicultural Literature](#) and [Racial Equity - Multicultural Competency](#). For an accessibility assessment tool, see [Accessibility in Online Courses - Trends, Tips, and Tools](#).

4. Assignment Assessment

Whenever possible, create room for student choice and voice in assignments (within topics, prompts, and formats). Allowing students agency to make a meaningful choice is empowering, strengthens assignment relevance, and conveys respect for students. Proactively offer alternatives when appropriate and ensure supplemental resources represent a wide range of gender, ethnic, and racial groups.

5. Collaboration and Feedback Improvement Cycles

Instructors are often closest to course content, and design teams rely upon your insights regarding curricular relevance, inclusivity, and impact. Share course design feedback to raise awareness of potential oversights and opportunities for more representative curricula.

6. Personalization

Celebrate diversity through warm, inclusive, and supportive responses to students’ contributions. Students often enter a new course feeling vulnerable and unsure, but there are many ways we can help all students feel that they belong. When greeting students in an online forum, make note of their preferred names and pronouns. Actively seek out what makes students unique and what makes them curious. Share personal anecdotes and narratives to humanize interactions. Model safe sharing. Express interest in cultural backgrounds and the

etymology of unusual names. You might also review this great list of [ways to help students feels like they belong](#).

In “Like a Veil: Cross-cultural Experiential Learning Online,” Merry Merryfield writes about making the most of access to “insider discourse,” or exposing students to discourse between professionals who they would not ordinarily hear discussing topics with one another, throughout online learning communities. In order to foster a sense of belonging to the class community and conversation, lead students towards participation in their own “insider discourse” by encouraging everyone in the virtual classroom to read all posts from their peers, even if they don’t formally respond to them.

7. Qualitative Discussion Reviews

Prioritize warmth, support, and authenticity in all communications within your online classroom. Use [discussion questions intentionally](#) and in a [learner-focused manner](#). Actively encourage students to reflect on explicit and implicit issues of culture, diversity, and inclusivity as they relate to discussion topics. Encouraging students to share appropriate resources that relate to course content and have personal relevance also helps them see the connection between class concepts and the real world.

It should go without saying that instructors must read all students’ public class contributions (actual text and subtext) and proactively address inconsiderate posts and cultural insensitivity. Moreover, instructors should ensure all sides of a topic are explored. When prompts encourage discussion on controversial topics, consider neutrally assigning “topic sides” (based on first letter of last name, first letter of first name, etc.). When a discussion prompt requires students to take a position, ask that peer responses take a counter position.

Finally, pause to review all of your emails and posts for friendly and professional tone and clarity. “[Don’t Look at Me in That Tone of Voice – 7 Tips for Better Communication](#)” by Heather Frederick and Melanie Shaw is a great resource for reviewing your email etiquette.

8. Quantitative Self-Checks

Keep track of your weekly discussion board responses to students and strive for consistency and equity in replies shared with students over the course of a term. Merryfield also reminds us to be watchful for “the lesson of isolates,” or “people to whom others rarely respond in discussions.” Avoid promoting isolation by encouraging students to respond to different peers each week and/or posts with no replies.

9. Private Interactions

Private communications with students are just as critical as class-wide communications. When using email, be careful not to assume preferred gender pronouns and always

address students by name. Phone conversations can often help personalize instruction, build relationships, and clarify misunderstandings. Strive to pronounce students’ names properly by encouraging students to share audio recordings in a post with their name’s proper pronunciation (a list of five great, free tools for doing this is [here](#)).

10. What’s Not Said Matters, Too

What we don’t say or do can be just as powerful as our speech and actions. Continuously be aware of language or content with implicit biases that may unintentionally and unknowingly impact and influence classroom dynamics and learning. An instructor’s active presence and ongoing communication in the online classroom can help make what might otherwise be implied (and potentially misunderstood) explicit and clear for all students.

Jennifer Schneider, *Team Lead, Adjunct Faculty*

For further information, contact the author at Southern New Hampshire University, 2500 N River Road, Hooksett, NH 03106. Email: j.schneider@snhu.edu

References

- Allen, I.E. & Seaman, J. (2017). Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Report Enrollment Report 2017. Retrieved from <https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/digitallearningcompassenrollment2017.pdf>
- Gollnick, D.M., & Chinn, P.C. (2017). Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society (10th Ed). Boston, Massachusetts: Pearson Education.
- Herold, B. (2018). Online Classes for K-12 Students: An Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/online-classes/index.html>
- Merryfield, M. (2013). Like a Veil: Cross-cultural Experiential Learning Online. Retrieved from http://adlawrence.blogs.wm.edu/files/2011/03/Cross_cultural_experiential_learning.pdf
- Online Learning Consortium. (2017). New Study: Over Six Million Students Now Enrolled in Distance Education. Retrieved from https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/news_item/new-study-six-million-students-now-enrolled-distance-education/