

Cultivating an Inclusive Climate in Online Classrooms

University classrooms, including online classrooms, are dynamic spaces where complex interactions occur. Simply outlining and following respectful online behaviours and interactions (known as 'netiquette') often do not go far enough to untangle underlying assumptions that come into play in interpersonal interactions, including those that take place in online learning spaces. This document is intended to offer some first steps toward thinking about how equity and inclusion can inform online classroom interactions in order to establish and uphold standards of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in online courses.

BEFORE CLASS AND EARLY IN THE TERM

Offer meaningful territory acknowledgements.

Acknowledging the Indigenous territories within or surrounding your institution, or where you and students are located, is a first step to help ground you and the course in the lands you are on. It can also help to enable conversations about location and relationships to land, which can be an exciting way to learn more about one another. Read more about various approaches and rationales for territory acknowledgements in the Online Teaching Program module [Classroom climate online](#).

Build flexibility and multiple options into the course plan.

Online learning is often assumed to make learning more accessible, but it can actually exacerbate pre-existing inequities if it is undertaken without an EDI lens. Online learning involves widely varying levels of access to technology and resources as well as different student needs; when a course has barriers to student learning, it sends an implicit and yet clear message to some students that they are not welcome and their contributions are not important. When students feel marginalized, their academic engagement declines. Therefore, it is crucial to build flexibility and multiple options into every aspect of your course — including course materials, learning activities, and assessment. For example, when you run a synchronous class using a video conferencing tool, make sure there's also a way to call in. If people are typing in the chat box, be sure to read comments aloud. Provide asynchronous options for people to participate during times that work best for them. See the [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Online Teaching: Where to Begin? handout \(PDF\)](#) for more ideas about how to offer options and flexibility.

Be sure that students have multiple ways to get in touch with you.

Unlike face-to-face classrooms, students in online environments cannot approach the instructor after class for a quick chat or casual question. Therefore it is important to intentionally create easy and multiple communication channels and encourage students to utilize them whenever needed. For example, you may consider setting up drop-in online office hours and/or time slots that students can sign up to meet with you one-on-one by using an



online tool, such as an online calendar. In addition, add asynchronous ways in which students can contact you, such as email. These communications reinforce the importance of human connection that will keep students invested and accountable to you and one another in the course.

Co-create your classroom guidelines with an eye to equity, diversity and inclusion.

One of the ways to create a more inclusive classroom environment is to set classroom guidelines or an agreed-upon list of expectations for classroom conduct among students and the instructor. If you decide to create such a document, bear in mind that research shows that people are more likely to make hurtful or offensive comments in an online platform than they are during face-to-face interactions. Letting your class know about this when creating classroom guidelines will help keep those considerations in top of mind. Include examples where incivility intersects with concerns about equity and inclusion (e.g., a racist assumption or sexist joke) so students know that you are concerned about these types of interactions and will pay close attention to them. Read more about classroom guidelines and how you might go about creating them in the [Classroom Guidelines handout \(PDF\)](#).

Technical considerations

In addition to EDI considerations, there are technical protocols specific to online environments that you may wish to include in your classroom guidelines. These may address aspects of video conferencing, such as keeping microphones muted when not speaking, using the 'raise hand' function to speak up, agreeing to use or not use video, and whether online classes will be recorded. It is important to consider how these relate to issues of privacy and consent. To learn more about privacy considerations for instructors and resources for students, visit the [UBC Learning Technology Hub Privacy page](#).

Post the class guidelines prominently in your course page.

Once you have created guidelines for your class you will need to ensure that online learners are able to easily refer to them. Many online platforms allow a post to be 'pinned' to the top of the class homepage. Be sure that your class's expectations are displayed in a way that requires people to see them. Refer back to them frequently.

Humanize the space.

Online platforms can make it easy to forget that there are people behind our screens. Sharing something about yourself can go a long way in creating much-needed human connection. Consider starting the class by introducing your name, pronouns, your relationship to the land (see the territory acknowledgement section above), first and additional languages, and any other aspects of yourself that may be important for students to know. Provide opportunities for each student to share about themselves in return, only if they wish to.

THROUGHOUT THE TERM

Check in with students often.

It can be more difficult to gauge how students are doing in online environments. Actively encourage students to provide feedback and share their concerns or questions with you. Besides encouraging students to reach out to you individually, you may also consider administering an anonymous online survey using Qualtrics or using a polling function in Collaborate Ultra. Read [Mid-course Feedback on Teaching](#) to learn about implementation strategies and sample questions.



Intervene in microaggressions.

Just as with in-person classrooms, when someone makes a derogatory comment or invalidates someone's experiences, the instructor has a responsibility to intervene and respond. Be prepared to weigh in carefully when discussions go off topic or someone is not following guidelines of engagement set for the class. This includes pausing the discussion, offering acknowledgement, validation and support to those who were targeted, and creating an opportunity for critical reflection. For example, in synchronous moments, you could ask students, "How might someone from -- community interpret this statement?" to start a conversation. When addressing such comments, assume that there are students who are directly impacted (even if the comment was not intended to cause harm), and remember that students are looking to you to model inclusive and respectful behaviour. Read more about microaggressions and potential ways of addressing them in the [Microaggressions in the Classroom handout \(PDF\)](#).

Acknowledge the social context.

A number of studies have shown the importance to students' learning experiences of connecting the broader social context to classroom climate. When a crisis (such as a global pandemic, large-scale social protest, a tragedy in the campus or local community, etc.) occurs, choosing to not acknowledge it can negatively affect students' learning and sense of belonging by causing feelings of frustration, disappointment, or disconnect. In contrast, students tend to appreciate instructors who respond to a collective tragedy in a humane way, even if that recognition comes in a simple form (e.g., one minute of silence, sharing some resources, and/or noting out loud that "something important has happened and many of us may be struggling"). In addition, you may discuss the discipline's contributions to and/or complicity in the crisis (e.g., discriminatory history of the discipline, how research in the discipline contributed to resolving a similar crisis in the past). Further, when appropriate and possible, consider integrating those current events into your course to help students make meaningful connections between the events and what they are learning in the course (e.g., a case study about a current event, assignment to examine a current event with an analytical framework or skills taught in the course). However, consider making any such activities optional, as students who are affected by the events may not have capacity to further engage.

Cut yourself some slack.

An instructor who is extremely tense or always exhausted will be less effective leading an online course. Try to keep a sense of humour, and laugh at your technology mistakes and inevitable glitches. Students will appreciate your willingness to show your human imperfections, and may be more comfortable letting you know when their own challenges arise.

Sources

Visit the [Cultivating an Inclusive Climate in Online Classrooms wiki page](#) for a full list of references.



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