

The Voice of Your Classroom: Using Inclusive Virtual Backgrounds to Design Affirming and Welcoming Learning Environments



Objective

To design digital spaces that promote an affirming and welcoming environment by fostering a sense of community with the images you include.

The estimated time for this activity is 45 - 60 minutes.



Stop & Think

Key (T - teacher; SL - school leader; DL - district leader)

In the article [“Using Inclusive Virtual Backgrounds Is Essential to the Success of LGBTQ and Other Marginalized Youth,”](#) the *Human Rights Campaign* shares some startling statistics about students’ experiences and feelings of safety at home and school. School counselor Erika Zamora notes, “now more than ever our students need to know that their schools are a safe space.” In remote/hybrid learning, we must consider a variety of digital spaces.

Digital space	Questions and considerations for each digital space
<input type="checkbox"/> Online learning platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the purpose of this space and each image in this space? (T, SL, DL)• Are there images that represent both my students’ cultures, languages, orientations, and identities and mine? (T, SL)• Do my digital spaces represent my values, background, and culture? (T)• Are my digital spaces accessible to linguistically and cognitively diverse learners? (T, SL)• Are my digital spaces accessible to marginalized populations in my class, building, or district? (T, SL, DL)
<input type="checkbox"/> Digital assignments	
<input type="checkbox"/> Digital, linkable library or bookshelf	
<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-created videos and screencasts	
<input type="checkbox"/> Interactive websites	
<input type="checkbox"/> Online articles, passages, and videos	
<input type="checkbox"/> School and district websites	

<input type="checkbox"/> E-newsletters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do my images resonate with and celebrate cultures that matter to my students' communities? (T, SL, DL)
<input type="checkbox"/> Email signatures	



Brainstorm & Design

Use the tips below to plan and design your welcoming and affirming digital environments.

Foster a sense of community by including images that represent both your and your students' backgrounds and interests.



Make your images meaningful! Digital spaces can get cluttered quickly, making it difficult for learners to focus on what's important. Limit extra images or text that can be distracting or unimportant. Anticipate student needs and look for opportunities to provide support in your digital spaces.

Consider the two activities below for cognitive accessibility. Consider the images, text, and blank space as they relate to promoting understanding of the curricular skill or concept (addition with base 10 blocks)

A

Activity A is a digital workspace for solving addition problems using base 10 blocks. It features a purple dotted border. At the top left is a cartoon woman with glasses. The main instruction reads: "USE THE BLOCKS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS BELOW. Move the blocks under each problem." Below this are three problems: 1. $18 + 3 =$, 2. $15 + 6 =$, and 3. $14 + 2 =$. Each problem has a pile of base 10 blocks (red tens and blue ones) to its left. To the right of the problems are a thumbs-up icon, a "Woohoo!" text bubble, and a green checkmark with the text "YOU GOT THIS". At the bottom, a small text note says "Bitmoji is a registered trademark of Snap, Inc."

B

Activity B is a digital workspace for solving addition problems using base 10 blocks. It has a clean, minimalist design with a white background and a black border. The instruction reads: "Drag the blocks from the piles at the bottom of the page to solve the problems. Click [here](#) to watch a how-to video." Below this are three problems: 1. $18 + 3 =$, 2. $15 + 6 =$, and 2. $14 + 2 =$. Each problem has a small empty box for the answer. At the bottom left, there are two piles of base 10 blocks: one red ten-block and one blue one-block.

Although "A" is initially visually appealing, there is little to no academic relevance to the images, border, font, font size, or font color. The extraneous information could detract from learning. There is little blank space for learners to complete their work and the tens and ones blocks must first be moved before they can be used to correctly solve the problems.

"B" is more instructionally accessible for several reasons:

- Font, font size, and font color are clear and relevant to the activity.

- By piling the tens and ones blocks at the bottom, students can access the digital manipulatives and use the blank space to solve the problems.
- There is a how-to video linked directly on the page so students can independently access help while working.
- The blank space is organized and purposeful, including space for student work and student answers.

Check your text. Are the fonts, font size, and font color clearly legible for all of your learners? Is your language clear, simple, and accessible for your bilingual and multilingual emergent students? Cognitively and linguistically diverse learners may benefit from a differentiated assignment, resource, or platform.

What do you notice about the accessibility of the linkable library below?



- Book titles and images are representative of learners' backgrounds, interests, and cultures.
- Books are high interest and available at a range of levels and in a range of languages.

- Book levels are clearly labeled (you could also create an entire slide/page at a particular level).
- Links offer audible versions for learners and, when applicable, links to available reading subscriptions and other resources for learners and their families.

After reading the tips above, brainstorm ways you can incorporate them into your digital spaces using the table [linked here](#) and shown below.

Download a printable PDF version:

Tips	How I'm going to use this tip in my digital spaces	
	Digital space(s):	Ideas:
Foster a sense of community by including images that represent both your and your students' backgrounds and interests.		
Make your images meaningful! Digital spaces can get cluttered quickly, making it difficult for learners to focus on what's important. Limit extra images or text that can be distracting or unimportant. Anticipate student needs and look for opportunities to provide support in your digital spaces.		
Check your text. Are the fonts, font size, and font color clearly legible for all		

of your learners? Is your language clear, simple, and accessible for your bilingual and multilingual emergent students? Cognitively and linguistically diverse learners may benefit from a differentiated assignment, resource, or platform.		
--	--	--