How to Structure Your Online Class for Inclusion: Two Principles for Fostering Engagement, Part 2
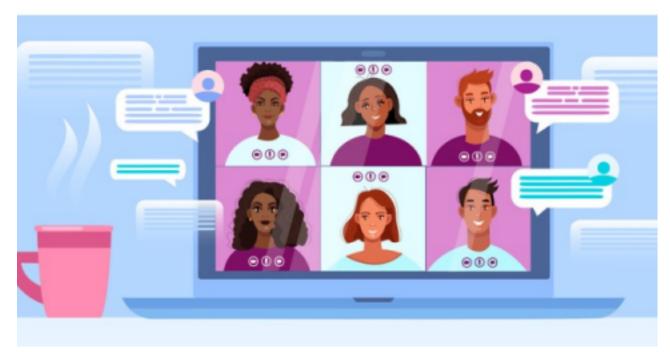
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FACULTY FOCUS

HIGHER ED TEACHING STRATEGIES FROM MAGNA PUBLICATIONS

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Principle #1: Build community to foster engagement online

A sense of community fosters a sense of belongingness and is critical to student engagement. Building a sense of community is a first step in ensuring that students are engaged in their classes, especially for historically minoritized students (Pacansky-Brock et. al 2020; Plotts 2019; Brown and Burdsal; 2006, Rovai and Gallien; 2005; Tu & Correy, 2002). To structure a class that includes everyone and promotes student engagement, we need to think about what goes into building a community and what that can look like when teaching online.

The Council For At Risk Student Education and Professional Standards Accreditation (2020) provides evidenced-based standards for building a sense of community, student engagement,

course introductions, assessment, group projects/group development, and experiential learning. The following recommendations are based on those standards.

A strong sense of community begins with faculty designing and planning for the sense of community in the course. In order to build a strong sense of community within an online course, instructors should start by identifying the type of community they want to create. In other words, what is the common thread that runs through an online course: Inquiry, information giving, information gathering, and/or active listening?

Although not intuitive to all instructors, this question surrounding the idea of a sense of community is imperative for creating cohesion and a sense of belonging to a learning environment. Here are some ways that instructors might start to think about what community might mean for their class context:

1. **Understand** the difference between a citizen of a learning community and the concept of an individual student attending the course. What would it mean for someone to become a "citizen" in your class? What is the role of students in your class's learning community?
2. **Create** a definition, purpose, and a commitment statement of a sense of community. Post this in the syllabus, welcome email, and announcement section.
3. **Build and post** a sense of community rubric for your students. As the leader of a learning community, instructors should want to assess how the learning community is interacting, developing, and growing. Students also benefit from this information. Instructors should focus on community at large and cohesion, or lack thereof, in the learning environment. Areas for improvement can also be addressed. Sharing this type of information with the community can benefit students who are experiencing feelings of isolation or marginalization. Instructors can post a graded sense of community rubric in the announcement section of the course every other week or once a month. A community rubric might provide feedback such as community cohesion, tone, civility, and open-mindedness or other attributes associated with positive learning community outcomes. Feedback may also include what the community is doing well and areas of improvement to help foster a sense of community cohesion and learning citizenry in the online environment.
4. **Co-create** community norms with your students and post those norms to the class's discussion forum or in an announcements section. This will highlight the importance of students' roles in the class as community members and help them feel connected to the community space. Allow both anonymous and public options for value development to make sure all students have an option to lend their voice to the process.

5. **Ask** students to define student engagement with you. Post the start of a definition in

your course management system and give students an opportunity to comment on the definition, build upon it, or add new ideas to it. This helps give instructors a sense of student motivation and learning preferences within the course.

6. **Identify** opportunities to co-teach with your students. For example, when might small groups of students lead a discussion? When might small groups of students create a study guide to share with their peers?

Principle #2: Create options for students to engage online

A framework that is becoming increasingly popular for supporting engagement within and among diverse student audiences is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL, developed by the CAST Organization, offers three key guidelines for educators:

1. Offer multiple means of student engagement
2. Create multiple means of representation for course materials
3. Make multiple means of action and expression for student learning available.

In practice, that means considering a range of ways that students can participate in class and still reach the same learning goals for the class.

Here's an example: Imagine that you'd like students to submit a response to a question that you'd like them to consider. Perhaps your first reaction is to ask each student to create a short video where they respond to the question in a recording. That might be an excellent option for many students, but for students who don't have access to high-quality recording technology or a high-speed Internet connection, or for students who are blind or deaf, this option might not work as well for them. In this case, you might want to open up the assignment to include submission options in not just video form, but in audio, or in written text.

Offering students a choice for how they want to answer the question gives them some agency to decide how they want to engage while still completing the basic task: To answer the question and offer their thoughts. By offering these choices, we give students multiple entry points to use through language or techniques that are available to them as they grow and develop new ways of expressing themselves and get more involved in the class community.

As instructors, our challenge is to try and imagine how people learn who are different than we are. In all likelihood, most of our students are not going to learn, think, and engage in exactly the same ways that we do. Our goal is to try and be prepared, as much as we possibly can, for students who have different lives than we do.

An initial reaction to learning about UDL is that it often seems like a time-consuming way to support student engagement. Certainly, it can take time to recognize and anticipate the range of students in your class. But doing so can have immediate rewards around building trust and

community with you and your students. Plus, you don't have to offer a whole menu of options for engagement entirely up front; even if you can offer just one alternative way to complete an assignment or participate in an online environment, you open just one more avenue to support students in your class.

Activities for engaging students online

We recognize that all instructors have different goals for engaging students online. A variety of learning activities might help instructors achieve those goals more readily. A framework that we've used to design engaging activities is the five "C's" from Kanevsky and Keighly (2003): Control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring. These five elements of student engagement help students invest in the learning process. For example, instructors can provide opportunities for students to control "how" they will meet course objectives (i.e. assignment choice). This is an example of control within the student engagement process. Next, instructors can extend opportunities for students to choose small portions of curriculum and content within a course. Additionally, faculty can present learning objectives and/or concept questions in the framework of a "challenge." This challenge would build on prior content knowledge and have some level of difficulty. Complexity refers to the various relationships between concepts and the intricacies of such relationships within curriculum. Lastly, caring refers to the genuine level of concern placed on academic outcomes of individual students and the students themselves.

To that end, we've anticipated some common goals that you might have for engaging your students online and provide a few options for how to achieve those goals with the 5 C's framework in mind:

If your engagement goal is to check in on your students' understanding of a difficult idea…

Share your remote access or allow students to share screens. Ask students to identify the different types of relationships between different concepts. Do this through sorting or categorizing activities. Observe and listen to how students are coming to their conclusions.

Start by providing students with a brief reading assignment. Then, assign lesson/course goals to individuals or a small group of students. Allow them to demonstrate how they will meet that goal. Students are then given 10-15 minutes to meet the goal. Students then share out with the larger class. This is also applicable for a large number of small groups.

Invite your students to build study guides and resources for the class. Create a space in your course management system for students to share notes with each other or to build a study resource that they could use to prepare for exams or create a summary of big ideas. Make the collective study guides a shared resource that everyone can contribute

to, use, and access throughout the course.

If your engagement goal is to facilitate a discussion of a controversial topic…

First, ask yourself, 'Are you emotionally prepared to lead, facilitate, or actively listen to controversial discussion?'

Design the online space for difficult conversations. Think about the time of year, time of day, day of the week. Is the conversation a one time conversation or is it more of a series of smaller conversations? What does follow-up look like? Are there remote access to counseling services for students who may need it now or in the future?

Make room for the important conversations prior, during, and after the conversation takes place.

Create a plan for moderating the conversation. Keep the five C's in mind: Control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring (Kanevsky and Keighly, 2003). Identify student support services staff who are willing to be ready to serve students prior to, during and after the difficulty discussion. This may include but are not limited to mental health counselors, leaders of campus organizations (i. e. cultural clubs) and anyone else who may be viewed as a student advocate besides the moderator.

If your engagement goal is to offer experiential learning…

Identify ways in which a student can **share** experiences in the online space. Screen sharing is an example.

Increase expectations for student **exploration** before, during, and/or after lecturing.

Foster relationships and **connections** between students and the content which they are learning.

Create and foster **curiosity** through observation and reflective assignments.

Answering the basic questions such as what happened, or what did I experience?

If your engagement goal is to facilitate group projects…

Define the criteria and **purpose of collaborative learning**. Is collaborative experience associated with a specific activity or learning outcome, to re-in-force prior learning, or as an activating strategy to increase attention during lecture? Define the group's **common goal**. What is the common goal: performance-based goal, a role-based goal and/or, culturally diversity, cross curricula goal?

Support **group development** for learners by allowing learners to create and identify cultural and group norms.

You Are Not Alone

Fostering community, student engagement, and community building in online spaces is a complex task for faculty in 2021. You can do the best you can to relate to your students individually and humanize your online classroom. At the same time, you, as the instructor, aren't the only person who can shape students' experiences online in positive ways. There are many members of your university's community who can help you work with your students to build a strong sense of community and to foster engagement.

Many offices on your campus may be involved in efforts to engage students in their online university experience, like the:

> Campus library
> Disability services
> Teaching and learning centers
> Technology services
> Multicultural centers
> Career centers
> Counseling and psychological services

When we help students become aware of these networks and resources, we can reinforce students' sense of belonging not just in our own online classes, but in the university as a whole.

Click here to read, How to Structure Your Online Class for Inclusion, Part 1.

Recommended resources:

Books

> *99 Tips For Creating Simple and Sustainable Education Videos* by Karen Costa
> *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* by Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling
> *Intentional Tech: Principles to Guide the Use of Educational Technology in Higher Education* by Derek Bruff
> *Advancing Online Teaching: Creating Equity-Based Digital Learning Environments* by Kevin Kelly and Todd D. Zakrajsek
> *Best Practices for Teaching with Emerging Technology* by Michelle Pacansky-Brock
> *Small Teaching Online* by Flower Darby

Podcasts

> Teaching in Higher Ed

Lecture Breakers
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Tea for Teaching
Think UDL

Articles

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Dr. Jenae Cohn writes and speaks about digital pedagogy and online teaching and learning. She currently works as the director of academic technology at California State University, Sacramento, and has held prior roles at Stanford University and the University of California, Davis. A trained writing instructor, Cohn has taught online, hybrid, and face to-face composition courses, and supports faculty in the development of courses across modalities. She offers workshops on topics related to online instruction, humanities pedagogy, and digital literacy. Dr. Jenae Cohn is the author of Skim, Dive, Surface: Teaching Digital Reading (West Virginia University Press, 2021). Skim, Dive, Surface invites conversation about the spectrum of affordances available within digital learning environments.

Dr. Courtney Plotts writes and speaks about culturally responsive teaching and community building. She has written two books on Latino/a and Black culture and online spaces. She is currently the National Chair of the Council for At Risk Student Education and Professional Standards. She has been recognized by the California State Legislature for A Bold

Commitment to Change and Education. She offers workshops on topics related to building community and culture in online spaces, effective culturally responsive teaching, and best practices.

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