

Fostering Inclusive Environments in Online Teaching

This tip guide is designed to provide faculty with practical, evidence-based strategies for fostering inclusivity while teaching online.

Faculty Reflection: Inclusive teaching results in students feeling a deeper sense of belonging and connection. Essential ongoing reflection questions for faculty members include: ***“Who is being left out as a result of the decisions I’m making? Who is being left behind?”*** (Wilhelm & Alexander, 2020).

Course Technology Equity: Email students prior to class to survey them about their available technology. Use the results to determine course delivery and post on Blackboard your plans for the use of formats (e.g., plans for synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of these two formats). Posting this information in the course outline/weekly schedule section of your syllabus also is helpful.

Breaks: Consider the use of cognitive breaks in long online classes with the use of guided practice to fulfill contact hour requirements. This could be done through the use of alternative individual and group learning activities. If you are holding synchronous classes in a course, build in and communicate short breaks so caregivers can help balance the demands of their multiple roles. Communicate this plan to students via several methods such as the syllabi and Blackboard announcements.

Office Hours: Focus office hours at the beginning of the course to assist students with navigating the technology needed for the course. Use office hours to connect with students from whom you have not heard or who seem to be having challenges with the course content (Wilhelm & Alexander, 2020) or with technology. When connecting with students, frame communications in affirming, not punitive, ways. Consider requesting that students attend group office hours in order to maintain positive relationships with other students and with the faculty.

Chat Function: Use the chat function during class breaks to contact students privately when they are not participating to discern whether they are having difficulty with the technology or have another reason for failing to engage.

Multiple and diverse examples: Using multiple and diverse examples helps make content meaningful to all students. Students benefit when instructors ask themselves: ***Will an international student understand this example? Will students from different socioeconomic backgrounds relate to this example?*** Thinking through the various lenses of student identity groups will help to determine the usefulness and applicability of content to all students.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Online Learning: Determine how you can more fully engage all students in asynchronous and synchronous learning by utilizing methods in the examples below:

- Use a blend of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities to ensure that students with a variety of learning approaches and access to resources, including technology equipment, Wi-Fi, and data, are fully included.
- Provide structure and clear communication. When presenting content, provide straightforward instructions on what to do, how to respond, and how long the activity will take. For example, upload instructions or reflection questions along with a video, rather than simply the video alone.

- Provide information in a timely manner and establish routines whenever possible. Post new content at regular intervals, post announcements at the same day/time each week, and provide standard day/time deadlines for assignments.
- Consider morning deadlines, rather than mid-day or late evening, in the event technology problems require the support of TU offices. (Wifi usage and use of hotspots may be compromised at mid-day due to high traffic.)
- Consider including a range of assessments – such as project-based assignments and other authentic assessments – that provide opportunities for a larger scope of learners.

Universal Language: The use of universal phrases is more inclusive than using binary or exclusive language. Consider the difference for non-binary students of reading a welcome message saying, “Good morning, students” versus “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” Use of inclusive language relating to gender roles conveys to students that the world of opportunities is open to them, no matter their gender identity.

Accommodations for Students: In online learning environments, all students benefit from a variety of approaches to delivering content, and this holds true for students with differing abilities. Some students may engage better with auditory rather than visual content. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing benefit from closed captioning of video content. Providing transcripts, written fact sheets, or downloadable worksheets in advance can be helpful. Accessibility and Disability Services support is available to faculty in teaching online at this link: [Accessibility and Disability Services](#).

Connect with students concerning Accommodation Memos, as some students who do not want to be perceived as “different” may be more likely to seek and employ appropriate accommodations in an online environment than in a face-to-face class. Some TU faculty have adopted “no request accommodations” for students, such as providing students up to two excused absences, dropping the lowest graded assignment, or other built-in syllabus adjustments.

Religious Accommodations: Best practices suggest that religious accommodations are demonstrative of an inclusive classroom, both online and face-to-face. Faculty are expected to make reasonable accommodations for religious observances as required by both Towson University policy and USM policy. For example, some observant students’ religious traditions or norms may dictate that they are not to be depicted by video or photograph. Therefore, instructors should provide students with an option to request this practice be accommodated. Additionally, some students may be fasting due to a religious holiday. Therefore, a synchronous class during the breaking of the fast may not be the best time for those students to engage. Both a detailed calendar of religious observances and recommended accommodations are available at this link: [Holy Days & Observances](#).

Online Course Expectation for Inclusion: Another way to prioritize an inclusive mindset throughout the semester is to articulate a diversity and inclusion expectation in the course and in the syllabus. Here’s an example that can be adapted for online teaching:

“In this class, I want all my students to feel accepted for who they are, which includes every aspect of their being. I want you to feel comfortable in expressing yourself and sharing your experiences. What makes you different is what makes you special. I will not tolerate hatred or abuse of any type in this course. Please be respectful of others at all times. Remember you do

not have to agree with someone's lifestyle, spirituality, or choices, but you can still respect them and interact with kindness always. Thank you!" (Velez-Solic, 2020, p. 24).

Online Classroom Climate and Hate/Bias Incidents: University policies, including the [Code of Student Conduct](#), still apply in online classrooms. Inclusive teaching practices involve paying careful attention to how students are engaging with the material and each other, both in live sessions as well as in their posts and other submissions. In asynchronous interactions, it often may be difficult to infer tone and intent. Consider creating guidelines for civil discourse in online interactions such as the expectations described above.

Microaggressions: Observe and address group dynamics and microaggressions (See Appendix A) in online class discussions and in small work groups. If identified, it is essential that instructors **confront bigotry in all of its forms**. Invite the microaggressor into an individual meeting – physical or virtual -- away from the full class for acknowledgement and clarification, use the meeting to speak to a student directly, or ask open-ended questions of the student to learn more about their perspective while also challenging that perspective. The discussion is best accomplished through a constructive, corrective approach, rather than with a punitive tone. A non-negative approach recognizes that a student may say or do things that are perceived as microaggressions without intending to cause harm.

A Final Word About Online Learning Approaches: Online teaching and learning environments provide additional opportunities to celebrate and benefit from TU's student diversity, if managed with an inclusive mindset. [The Office of the Provost](#), the [Office of Inclusion and Institutional Equity](#), [FACET](#), [Accessibility and Disability Services](#), and the [Technology and Information Accessibility Page](#) are available to assist you in any effort to design more inclusive online courses.

References and Resources

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Appendix A: Microaggressions

Microaggressions are small, seemingly trivial instances of bigoted or insensitive statements and actions that have the cumulative effect of causing great distress to students in diverse categories (Nadal, 2019; Sue, et al., 2009). Instructors should be able to identify microaggressions and combat it in online environments

Examples of online microaggressions usually fall into four categories (Nadal, 2019; Sue et al., 2009):

- **Stereotypes:** An “unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic”. Overgeneralizing based on social identity groups can occur both online and face to face. For example, saying to a person of Asian descent, “You must be really smart.”
- **Exceptionalism:** This can be a backhanded compliment such as “I didn’t realize you were _____ because you seem so well spoken.”
- **Minimizing:** Attempting to connect and/or commiserate with a minoritized population as a majority group member. For example, “I understand how hard it is to be Black because my ancestors came from _____ and they, too, experienced discrimination.”
- **Criminality or immorality:** Demonstrating concern or fear around certain persons and assuming that they are less trustworthy than members of one’s own group or of the majority group.