

## **Simple Steps Towards Equitable Online Courses**

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### **Author Note**

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**Abstract**

It is well-known that academic life can be very stressful for students. We are currently in the middle of a pandemic and living in a time of deep social reflection and transformation, which has brought a new level of stress to our students, who are experiencing it in different ways. This is impacting all learning environments, including online courses. Approaches for making online courses more inclusive have been discussed extensively, but we are still learning how to go about achieving equitable courses. This article will highlight lessons learned from teaching experiences and from listening to students, including the importance of observing and identifying the factors contributing to the increased stress that students in your online course may be facing. It will also discuss simple strategies to help all your students achieve academic success.

*Keywords:* Inclusion, Equity, Online, Education, Pandemic

## Introduction

Students will always endure stress due to their academics, exacerbated by pressure to maintain good grades. We are currently in the middle of a pandemic and living in a time of deep social reflection and transformation, which has brought a new level of stress to our students, who are experiencing it in different ways. With most in-person learning moving to remote learning, students are also facing technological challenges. These stressors can range from lacking the right hardware or having insufficient wifi bandwidth, to dealing with glitchy tools and other online resources we ask them to use. In addition, they could be facing personal, family, and even social issues, all of which can cause anxiety and affect students' academic performance. Certain learning environment climates can also be harmful if students do not feel accepted, included, cared for, and safe either with their professor and/or their fellow students, causing them to not feel like a part of the classroom community. Our students' attention is diverted by all these factors. According to Cavanagh (2016), "We have limited attention, and competition for that attention is fierce" (p. 33). Being aware of these factors and intervening with clear and intentional actions will result in a more inclusive learning climate and will improve the academic achievement of students.

By being understanding of our students' circumstances and keeping them in mind when designing our courses, we will show our students that we care about them, bringing a sense of belonging and community to our classes. This will help our students achieve their highest academic potential. Geneva Gay (2018) tells us that to be a caring educator means to be an educator that has high expectations, relates genuinely to their students, and facilitates tirelessly, never giving up on students and always looking for inclusive and innovative approaches (p. 57). As educators, we need to maintain our commitment to deliver our online classes effectively and

ensure students are learning the content, but now more than ever, we must remember that our learners have different needs that need to be attended to. In this difficult time, we have a heightened responsibility towards our students. The key is to care and make sure this is reflected in our teaching practices so that it comes across to students. How do we show we care in online or hybrid courses? (Cohn, 2020) Per conversations with students in an online course at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) (Jones & Vidal, 2020), students made a few suggestions for improvement, among them were the need for ground rules, simplified and clearer instructions, more facilitator and student involvement and engagement, and their basic needs acknowledged.

### **Bringing Equity to Online Courses**

Four elements that will help bring equity to online courses are: build a learning community, be present in the online environment, create structure and make success transparent, and give your students agency.

Here are a few simple tips to being inclusive and showing your students you care around those four elements.

#### **Build a Community**

To build a learning community, we all need to know and trust each other. For online courses, some of the best practice strategies for getting to know your students include setting up an introduction forum to know your students and so they know each other. Be sure to share about yourself. You are a part of this learning community. Having a “water fountain” forum where you and students can interact more informally is also another way of creating interpersonal relations, which would occur more naturally in a face-to-face course as students would gather around the water fountain outside the classroom before class. A “water fountain” forum provides the virtual

space for these conversations in online courses. If your online course has synchronous meetings, do not forget to ask them how they are doing and provide a few minutes for this conversation each meeting. For these synchronous meetings, also consider allowing students to be off-camera. Castelli & Sarvary (2021) surveyed students to find out why they did not turn on their cameras during class meetings. Among the reasons listed, students mentioned personal appearance, concern about physical location, and a weak internet connection, “all of which our exploratory analyses suggest may disproportionately influence underrepresented minorities.” If your concern is to make sure students are engaged during synchronous meetings, the authors suggest other alternatives, such as active learning activities.

It is important that you know your students for these interactions. For this purpose, you can give them an identity questionnaire at the beginning of the term to learn about their place of origin, their pets, their family, reason for taking your course, their academic goals, as well as to survey them on their course expectations, concerns, and challenges (such as technology limitations). As you interact with them in the discussion boards, use this knowledge to guide your comments and feedback. Let them know you see them. Online learning does not hamper you from knowing them. However, it will mean you need to be more intentional about creating a trusting relationship with students.

They will trust you if they feel supported and understood. As we are all aware of all the challenges our students are facing, now more than ever we need to allow flexibility in our courses' schedules so when a student cannot make a deadline, you can offer an extension. Being flexible also means allowing for different ways of expression (The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines: UDL), for example allowing them to record their response to a reading as an alternative to submitting a written paper. If you ask your students to keep field notes or

reflection journals, give them the option of doing so as a recording, a series of images, or a video. In this way, you are not only giving them the option of writing their responses. Keep in mind that usually our courses and more specifically online courses rely heavily on written assignments. If this cannot be avoided, try to be flexible with grammar standards, as you may have international students whose first language is not English or students who just simply may not be strong writers. To decide between giving a written, audio, or video assignment, always keep in mind what is the learning objective. Additionally, to set up every student for success consider using free and open educational resources (OER Commons - Open Educational Resources). Another option is to use only the tools included in your learning management system (LMS), even if this will require you to be especially creative about how a certain assignment is done. Remember to consult the UDL Guidelines for more suggestions on how to include all your learners in terms of engagement, representation, and action and expression. To learn more about web accessibility, consult the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) so all your students, even those with certain disabilities, can access your course's materials.

### **Be Present in the Online Environment**

Being present in an online course means not only engaging with them in forums and responding to email communications but also giving your students feedback and a nudge when needed. Students have told us (Jones & Vidal, 2020) that when facilitators are not actively involved in their forums, they lose interest. So be an active participant in the forums. Let them know you are on the other end and following their work. Be sure to respond to all the students' comments. If you cannot, always alternate. Every student should receive some acknowledgment and validation each week, whether for their original first post or their response to another student's post. Also, monitor forums for questions and try to respond to students' emails within

24 hours. Students should know that they are not alone in the course. Providing ongoing and frequent feedback to students, as well as virtual office hours to discuss this feedback, is key for establishing your presence in your online course.

Be proactive and give your students a nudge! Be sure to let students know how they are doing in your course, even if they are not reaching out to you. Remind them of your office hours. Give them a list of available resources at your institution, for example where to find student academic support to help them find strategies for studying and optimizing their time management.

Another well-known best practice is to give students a mid-term survey. Mid-term surveys will help you and your students reflect on how the course is going. You can ask them simple questions, such as: Is the pace of the course too fast, too slow, just about right? What is the most important thing you have learned so far? What challenges are you facing at this point? What is helping you learn in this course? What is making learning difficult in this course?

### **Create Structure and Make Success Transparent**

Clear instructions in the LMS (including objectives, expectations, deadlines, weight of grade, and who to contact for technological and academic support) and offering structure are key to being inclusive and equitable as it will help all your students be successful (Sathy & Hogan, 2019). You can be transparent about your course by sharing a roadmap to it: course' learning objectives, unit learning objectives, activities, tools, and assessments (Quality Matters). Clearly explain how they can be successful in your class, not only by listing the activities and assessments but by explaining all expectations (length, content, times of engagement, tone, etc.). Clarifying expectations and even providing models is key to being equitable so everyone has the opportunity of doing well in your class (Sathy & Hogan, 2019).

Additionally, be transparent about what it takes to participate fully in your class by setting up guidelines of participation. For synchronous and asynchronous contributions, clarify your participation grading criteria. What is the grade weight for participation? How is participation important for the learning of the course materials?

### **Finally, Give Agency to your Students**

Collaboration is an inherent part of education (Vidal, 2013). Partnering with your students will help them feel part of a learning community and in charge of their education.

To give your students agency and at the same time validate their experiences, ask them to bring their personal experiences to the content of the course in forums and discussions. You can invite them to submit a discussion question or even to lead a discussion in a forum. Students could also suggest guest speakers. Now that we are all online, it is easier to have guest speakers from all over the country and even from other parts of the world. We do not need to pay for travel and some guest speakers are not requesting a stipend. Giving talks at other institutions is a good way to connect with professionals in the field and engage in collaborative interactions.

Students in your course could also be involved in the selection of readings, can provide feedback to peers and do self-reflection, and could even give you feedback on a new rubric you may be piloting to implement it in the future (Vidal, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Some key elements to keep in mind for bringing equity to your course are the development of a caring learning community, your supportive presence as an educator in your online courses, the establishment of a clear structure for transparency, and the opportunity for your students to have a voice for them to be active partners in their learning.

Finally, a reminder to us educators. While we need to show students we care by adopting inclusive teaching practices, we also need to practice self-care because we are experiencing similar challenges to those our students are facing. Remember to keep your teaching and assignments simple but focused on the learning goals of your course and reach out to your colleagues and collaborate with them (Sundar, 2020), take short breaks during the day, go on brief walks, listen to music, find a hobby (Parker-Pope, n.d.), keep a journal (Orchids, n.d.), stay in touch with family and friends, and finally relax those neck muscles before going back to the computer to continue caring for your students.

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