Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Online Education:

Tips & Strategies from Boston University's Office of Distance Education

Boston University's Office of Distance Education created this guide for faculty and facilitators teaching fully-online courses. Use the following best practices to create inclusive learning environments that lessen barriers and help students succeed academically.

– Includes –

1. Tips for Course Development

2. Tips for Course Revision

3. Tips for Inclusive Teaching and Facilitating

4. Resources

Tips for Course Development

01 **Flexibility and variety:** Offer multiple opportunities for participation and engagement.

02 **Grading transparency:** Share specific expectations and standards. Include examples, guidelines, and rubrics to ensure grading is fair and consistent, especially if you have group facilitators.

03 **Create opportunities for student ownership:** Consider adding discussion questions that allow students to make contributions from their unique expertise and learn from others' experiences in the field. Consider providing students with opportunities to make choices related to topic, format, or presentation of course assignments and activities. Facilitate peer support and mutual help to build connections between students through peer review and feedback groups. Take a strength-based approach that emphasizes the unique skillset, resilience, and brilliance of each student.

04 **Find role models:** When possible, invite diverse guest speakers from your field, or bring in prior students to speak during live classroom sessions or recorded topical videos. Include broad representation (e.g. race, origin, age, and/or gender identity) in course materials.

05 **Include a variety of cultural references/scenarios:** Represent individuals of varied backgrounds in your course content. Diversify your materials so that students can see themselves reflected in the scholars and practitioners of your discipline. Avoid using symbols or imagery that may trigger stereotypes or be perceived as exclusive.

Tips for Course Development

06

Develop multiple modes of assessment: Consider a variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. Select methods of assessment that go beyond memorization to promote comprehension, skill building, and problem-solving. Begin assessment practices early and offer frequent feedback to students on their progress.

07

Design for accessibility: Ensure all students can access all course elements, materials, and specialized tools. Your instructional designer and the media team can help you implement best practices in accessible design.

08

Be consistent: Create a class that is structured, consistent, and predictable to limit student stress.

09

Avoid making assumptions about what students know: Create an environment where students know they can ask questions about anything. Not all students have had the same academic or cultural experiences.

10

Use financially accessible materials: Consider using library eReserves or free, open-source resources. Avoid using resources that require specialized technology, when possible.

Tips for Course Revision

01
Accountability: At the end of the term, ask students to offer ideas for improvement and encourage them to complete course evaluations. Ask if they had any difficulty in understanding or meeting course goals and expectations.

02
Discuss challenges with others: Faculty and facilitators may have ideas for modifications or experiences with student support methods that have worked well for them. Talk to your team at ODE, as well.

03
Double check accessibility: Accessibility best practices evolve over time. Work with your instructional designer to make sure your course content is up-to-date.

Tips for Inclusive Teaching and Facilitating

01

Recognize identity: Students' names may be different from names in the BU system. Offer students an opportunity to provide their names. Consider adding your pronouns to communications and your Zoom username early on. Give students the option to share theirs if they wish to do so, but do not make this mandatory. Some may not yet feel safe doing so, or may be exploring their identity. Alternatively, send a survey at the beginning of class asking questions about identity or other relevant information. In the survey, you might ask for pronouns to use in different contexts.

02

Message students: Recent studies (for both in person and online courses) show that regular group emails with encouragement and tips increase the probability that underrepresented groups and first-generation college students will both complete the course and succeed academically. Recognize progress, frame feedback. *Added benefit – messages can also be a good way to highlight important news and events relating to course topics.*

03

Walk the virtual space: Visit groups (discussion board, live classroom sessions, etc.) so students know that you are present, approachable, and engaged.

04

Encourage student agency in creating class norms: Solicit student input to co-create behavioral norms and policies for the class (e.g., how to contribute, how to voice disagreement, how to raise concerns, how to participate equitably in discussions or group work).

Tips for Inclusive Teaching and Facilitating

05
Record live classroom sessions: Recording your live classroom sessions allows students to review information later. Speaking clearly into a headset with a microphone will make the auto-generated searchable transcript more accurate, which is both more accessible and helps students locate information quickly when reviewing lectures.

06
Present with accessibility in mind: Read chat messages aloud before answering them so students can hear the question and ASL interpreters (if present) can sign them. Describe important images or charts on PowerPoint slides. Only show videos that have accurate captions.

07
Suggest resources for support: All online students have access to SmarThinking, a virtual tutoring service. Depending on the student, they may be able to get additional support from [Disability & Access Services](#) or the [Newbury Center for First-Generation Students](#).

08
Have flexible policies: Most of your students are working full-time while taking classes part-time. They may need to request extensions or alternate assignments. Be clear about your expectations and the process for extensions from the beginning of the semester.

Tips for Inclusive Teaching and Facilitating

09

Be aware of how current circumstances are impacting different communities. Some students may be affected by natural disasters, community disturbances, global pandemic, or other extenuating circumstances that influence their academic performance. Create an environment where students can reach out if their focus on class is impacted by major events, and be prepared to offer additional flexibility in regard to attendance and deadlines.

10

Know your reporting responsibilities: If a student discloses harassment or abuse to you, be prepared to contact your college's Title IX Coordinator or the university's Equal Opportunity Office. If you have concerns about a student's wellbeing, you may find helpful resources at Terriers Connect or you can reach out to Behavioral Medicine at BU.

Resources

The Boston University Diversity & Inclusion website offers many helpful resources. Notably, check out their Living Language Guide.

The Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) provides tips and resources in its Inclusive Teaching Practices Toolkit.

The Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education maintains a library of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion resources.

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